

Rara & Rarissima: collecting and interpreting unusual characteristics of human languages

RARA AND LINGUISTIC THEORY

This paper investigates the relationship between Rara and Linguistic Theory. The first part discusses (a) the methodological significance of Rara for the confirmation and development of linguistic theory, and (b) how hypotheses formulated within the framework of a (functional-typological) theory of grammar can lead to the discovery of new (rare) categories. In the second part I will discuss some uncommon features which have recently played an important role in Linguistic Theory.

Part 1. The interaction of Rara and Linguistic Theory

It is one of the main tasks of linguistic typology to investigate the range of cross-linguistic variation, in particular the limits of linguistic diversity (i.e. to determine where the variation stops, as when certain logical possibilities are not attested). In such an investigation, frequency of occurrence is relatively unimportant. What counts most is the fact that some property (a sound, a meaning, a form, a construction, etc.) is attested one of the world's languages, not so much the number of languages that happen to share that property (which may be due to an historical accident). Since a general theory of grammar must provide a model for the grammar of **each** individual language, essentially all grammatical properties are equally relevant. One could even argue that Rara are particularly important, since "exceptional types test the theory" (Perkins 1988: 367).

Both linguistic theory and typology employ classifications, which are based on certain parameters. In a way each classification provides us with a categorization and a prediction (a theory of what is deemed possible). Ideally, a classification has no gaps and includes all attested possibilities defined by the parameters. If the classification is too restricted (as when there are more attested possibilities than provided for in the classification) or too wide (as when certain possibilities are not attested in any language), the theory or classification needs to be revised (e.g. by using other parameters).

There is, however, also the possibility that the theory is correct, but that the database or sample was not representative of the linguistic diversity. This is, of course, where Rara play a crucial role: they may fill a gap in a classification and confirm a theory that predicted the existence of some grammatical phenomenon.

Part 2. Case studies

I will discuss two cases of Rara that have played a crucial role in the confirmation of (part of) a theory of grammar. One involves languages with isomorphic expressions of *Definiteness* and *Realis* (e.g. FONGBE - Levebvre 1998) or *non-specific Indefiniteness* and *Irrealis* (JACALTEC - Craig 1977); another concerns a language with maximally underspecified nouns (YUCATEC MAYA - Lucy 1992).

Reference

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