

Comparative sociolinguistics: A typological approach

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Comparative sociolinguistics is a field of sociolinguistics that connects sociolinguistic variation in one linguistic material to that in another material. It has primarily drawn influences from historical linguistics and quantitative sociolinguistics but not from language typology (e.g. Tagliamonte 2002). In this paper I propose that comparative sociolinguistic research can be productively done by using similar methodology as is generally done in language typology. I argue that understanding the problems in language comparison and the solutions that typologists have developed to address those problems will be beneficial in developing a sociolinguistic approach to comparing, for instance, small-scale multilingualism across speech communities.

One central problem in cross-linguistic comparison concerns the definition of the object of research: how to define it so that we compare the same phenomenon in the sampled languages in a principled way. Typologists call this the problem of cross-linguistic identification/comparison (e.g., Croft 2003, Stassen 2010). A general assumption in functional-typological research is that linguistic categories are not universal but particular to each language. In other words, neither the linguistic norms shared by the speakers nor the descriptions of those norms in descriptive grammars (i.e, descriptive categories) should be the basis of cross-linguistic comparison. Instead, comparison should use tools developed and defined by language typologists for that purpose. Haspelmath (2010, 2018) calls those tools comparative concepts and forcefully separates them from language-particular descriptive categories. In typological research we should thus distinguish three levels in the analysis: 1) linguistic norms, 2) descriptive (linguistic) categories, and 3) comparative (linguistic) concepts.

My aim is to demonstrate how these notions can be adapted to the analysis of sociolinguistic environments. The analysis of sociolinguistic environments begins with social norms, for instance, the beliefs, attitudes, and values shared in the speech community about language and their speakers. These norms and their descriptions are the target of research in much of sociolinguistic research. We thus need to distinguish social norms, such as the shared belief who is a native speaker and who is not, from the descriptions of those norms done by sociolinguists. I call those descriptions descriptive social categories and separate them from the tools that will be used for comparing the sociolinguistic environments across speech communities, namely, comparative social concepts (see Table 1).

In my presentation I further will discuss examples of how typological features are built on comparative concepts (e.g., dominant word order, standard negation, number of cases in *WALS*; Dryer & Haspelmath 2013). I also discuss the importance of understanding when comparative concepts are independent vs. dependent on one another, since this is crucial to correlational analyses. This discussion serves as a basis for elucidating how comparative concepts could be defined and used in comparative sociolinguistic research in an analogical way to language typology. Finally, I will also discuss how these notions adapted from language typology can serve as a basis of cross-linguistic analysis in a new project that researches adaptation of language structures to sociolinguistic environment in the languages of the world.

Table 1. Levels in typological and comparative sociolinguistic analysis.

	Linguistic sphere	Societal sphere
Community of speakers/signers	Linguistic norms	Social norms
Description	Descriptive (linguistic) categories	Descriptive social categories
Comparison	Comparative (linguistic) concepts	Comparative social concepts

References

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