Language Classification According to Grammatical Structure

Here you can read how languages vary according to amount of inflextion and syntax, and about methods used in languages to mark sentence constituent roles.

LANGUAGE CLASSIFICATION ACCORDING TO WORD COMPLEXITY

Most languages, if not all, are inflected to some degree.

A language that use little inflections, derivations or compositions, and thus have mostly simple words are called analytic. If a language uses a higher degree of such methods it is called strongly syntetic.

Laguages with an extremely high degree of syntesis are called polysyntetic. Many linguists also require that a language must have verbs that inflect according to both the subject and the object, and possibly other sentence constituents to get classified as such. In such languages one single verb word can be a full sentence with both subject and object incorporated.

But also polysynthetic languages have analythic means of expressing things, and practially the polysynthetic constuctions are usually combined with free words whem complex notions must be expressed.

Greek, Latin and Russian are examples of strongly synthetic language, while English and Chinese can be classified as analythic. Navajo, Greenlandic and Swahili are typical polysyntetic languages. The Romance languages like French, Italian and Spanish have constructions that strongly resemble polysyntesis. In orthography these are partly written as single words.

CLASSIFICATION ACCORDING TO DISTICNCTNESS OF ELEMENTS IN WORDS

Languages are also classified according to how words are made. If the words are made by distinct stems and distinct affixes put together, each with a specific function, it is called agglutinating.

If the words are made of stems combined with affixes with many functions simultanously, these fuse together with themselves and the stem, and sound alternations in the stems also may plays a role, the language is called flectating or fusional.

Most languages are at a stage somewhat betwen those extremes. Greek and Latin are fusional to a high degree, especially in nouns and adjectives, while Greek and Latin verbs are more agglutinating.

CLASSIFICATION OF LANGUAGES ACCORDING TO SYNTAX

Languages tend to fall into certain types regarding word and affix order. On etype is the SOV-type, which uses the word order subject-object-verb. An SVO-language also tend to have postpositions or case inflectins made by endings.

Another extreme type are the VSO-languages that mostly use the word order verb-subject-object and have prepositions or case prefixes. These languages nearly always have postponed attributes.

The most usual type of languages are the SVO-languages that mostly use the word order subject-verb-object. These can have prepositions, postpositions or case endings without one being preferd. SVO-languages also are as likely to have preposed as postposed aqdjectives.

English is typical SVO-language. Other European languages, like the Romance languages, Scandinavian and German are of a more blended typology.

HOW LANGUAGES MARK WHAT IS SUBJECT, OBJECT AND OTHER SENTENCE PARTS

But the superficial syntax classification does not tell how word order is used, only what order the constituents of a sentence tend mostly to appear in. In some languages the word order is used mainly to show what is subject and object, in others mainly to distingwish what is thought about, and what is new information about that thought about.

When the word order does not tell what role some element play in the sentence, some other things must be present to tell that.

The sentence parts may have case affixes, prepositions or postpositions to tell the role. These methods and also word order to show role are by a common name called dependent-marking.

Other languages use affixes attatched to the verb that tell something about the subject and object that can identify them. This method is called head marking. Polysynthetic languages are automatically head-marking because of the verb inflection according to both subject and object.

In many languages head-marking and dependent marking are combined.

To illustrate how head-marking works, this simple example from Italian, that is partly head-marking can illustrate.

"The sentence "I see this" can be rendered as such: Vedo questo. The verb vedo has the ending -o, telling that the subject is first person singular. But if you turn around the word order, the verb must also have an object element attatched: "Questo lo vedo". The pronoun "lo" is written separatedly, but is really a prefix to the verb that tells that "Questo - this" is the subject.

In Spanish the direct object is head-marked according to the same rule as in Italian, but the Indirect object is always head-marked. Example: I gave the apple to the boy: Le dí la manzana al chico. "Le" is the indirect object prefix attached to the verb "dí- I gave".

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