

Some say that the ultimate and most exciting aim of linguistics is the discovery of language universals. Once we know what is common to all languages, then we know what language is really like. A look into the history of 20th century linguistics reveals that an initial period of high expectations gave way to more modest research goals. It transpired that most (putative) universals were either trivial (“All languages have consonants”) or we had to admit to exceptions. This disillusionment led to a shift of focus from law-like universals to so-called statistical universals as well as implicational universals. Statistical universals take either of the following forms: “Languages are more likely to possess feature X than feature Y.” Or: “Languages are more likely to possess feature X than would be expected by chance alone.” Implicational universals take the form “If a given language possesses feature X, then it also possesses feature Y (though not vice versa).”

In this course, we will examine a good number of universals (understood in the above sense), usually starting from English and subsequently adopting a broader perspective. Each participant should be prepared to work on one particular universal for their oral presentations and/or term papers. All participants are expected to take an interest in languages other than English.

Course requirements:

Regular participation

Oral report

(Term paper)

Recommended reading:

Comrie, Bernard: Language universals and linguistic typology. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

Moravcsik, Edith: Introducing language typology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Velupillai, Viveka: An introduction to linguistic typology. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2013.