SEMIOTICS AND TYPOLOGY: WILL THE TWAIN EVER MEET?

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"Every language provides a means to coin
its own substance"
(Bolinger 1971:xi)

This article discusses the theoretical and methodological implications of sentence-oriented typologies based on traditional and neotraditional categories such as "conditionals" as opposed to sign-oriented or semiotic approaches which give the concept of meaning in general and invariant meaning in particular a more prominet role. It also questions assumptions about language universals and cross language equivalence found in most language typology studies in favor of more language specific studies. The so-called conditionals in English and Hebrew are compared and contrasted.

Key Words: semiotics, typology, conditionals, universals, equivalence

Most typological studies are based on the theoretical and methodological tenets of sentence-oriented linguistics and their accompanying sets of traditional and neotraditional syntactic categories which are compared and contrasted crosslinguistically based on their "equivalence" and "translatability" (Garcia et al 1987). Certain semiotic or sign-oriented linguistic theories however question or reject many of these traditional categories in favor of the linguistic sign and its fundamental component of invariant meaning as the basis of their analyses of linguistic systems within and across languages (Andersen 1991, Klein 1976, Lattey 1980, 1989). In this paper we will show how the sign-oriented principles of invariance, markedness, and distinctive feature theory can provide an alternative way of analyzing supposedly universal categories within and across languages to show how different they actually may be (Tobin 1993, 1994, 1997).

Most typological studies of universal categories usually choose the most frequently used, prototypical token of that category to represent that category in a language (as may be seen in Traugott et al 1986 and van der Auwera 1997). For example, *if* is the universal conditional discussed for English, *si* for Latin, and *im* would be their so-called equivalent in Hebrew. One must remember, however, that *if* is in opposition to at least one other (at least partially) synonymous conditional *whether* in English (Tobin 1990a:ch. 6) and *im* is in opposition to at least four other conditionals: *lu, ilu, lule, ilule* in Hebrew (all of which are translated as 'if') (Tobin 1994:ch. 3). In this paper we will show that although these forms may share a similar semantic domain: THE PRESENTATION OF POSSIBILITIES; they are marked for very different semantic features and, therefore, may be less equivalent and translatable across languages than was previously considered.

The English system of *if/whether* is marked for the distinctive feature *Semantic Integrality*. This feature is connected to aspects of human cognition and perception. Semantic Integrality is based on the assumption that there are two alternative ways of viewing entities in space, time, and existence: either as discrete entities (a + b = a + b) or as potentially discrete entities perceived as part of a continuous set (a + b = [ab]). In our analysis the form *whether* is marked for the feature Semantic Integrality and the form *if* is unmarked for this feature. In other words, *whether* presents possibilites as part of an integral set (perceived in continuous space, time, existence) from which one (or more) possibility (or possibilities) is/(are) chosen while *if* makes no claim as to the perception of a possibility (or possibilities) within a set or not. This marked/unmarked opposition is illustrated in examples (1) and (2):

(1)   I don't know *whether* you have brothers and sisters. *If* you do, Ishould very much like to have their addresses. (Vonnegut 1963:10)

(2)   Tell me *whether* you're coming or not, and *if so* (**whether so*), *whether* I should prepare a big meal or just order in.

The Hebrew system classifies the shared semantic domain of alternative ways of presenting possibilities differently. Hebrew distinguishes between *factive* and *non-factive* positive possibilities versus *contrary-to-fact* negative possibilities both of which are part of a relative hierarchy of possibility of occurrence or non-occurrence. Thus, while the English system classifies the alternative perception of possibilities as either being discrete or part of an integral set of possibilities, the Hebrew system classifies possibilities as either being factive/non-factive positive possibilities or contrary-to-fact negative possibilities in a hierarchical order of possibility of occurrence or non-occurrence.

The Hebrew system is composed of: (a) two simple independent (morphologically positive or affirmative) morphemes (*im/lu*) which signal high and low degrees of factive or non-factive possibilities of occurrence or non-occurrence respectively, and (b) three complex independent and bound (morphologically negative) morphemes (*i-* '*in-, un-, im-*') and *-le* (orthographically identical to *lo* 'no, not') which are added to *lu* (LOW POSSIBILITY) to convey a hierarchy of contrary-to-fact occurrences or non-occurrences. Not surprisingly, the more complex five member Hebrew system is iconic and economic to make it mnemonically more efficient. The small, independent, morphologically positive signs denote the widest range of possibilities (factive and non-factive) on a two member hierarchical system *im* (High) and *lu* (LOW):

(3)   *im* ata ba, tavi li sefer.
        '*if* you come, bring me a book.'

(4)   *lu* hayita ba, hayita mevi li sefer.
        '*if* you'd come, you'd bring me a book.'

The larger, morphologically negative signs composed of various dependent and independent morphemes signal more specific semantically and pragmatically complex contrary-to-fact possibilities, on a three member hierarchical system. These iconically more complex signs are transparent: they are composed of of the (morphologically) positive sign *lu* - LOW POSSIBILITY plus one or both negative morphemes: the prefix *i*- and/or the suffix -*le* which is written just like the independent negative morpheme *lo* - 'no, not' in an iconic tripartite hierarchical order: *i-lu* - LOW, *lu-le* - MID, *i-lu-le* - HIGH. The more complex the form and the more negative markers it has, the higher it is on the negative, contrary-to-fact three member hierarchy:

(5)   *ilu* bata, hayita mevi li sefer.
        '*If you *ame* you'd have brought me a book.'

(6)   *lule* bata, hayita mevi li sefer.
        '*If* you hadn't come, you'd have brought me a book.'

(7)   *ilule* bata, hayita mevi li sefer.
        '*If* you hadn't come, you'd have brought me a book.'

The Hebrew system is unlike the English system in other ways as well. Although the English conditionals (*if/whether*) have a strong tendency to collocate with the same verb tenses (e.g., unreal past, conditional, future, historical subjunctive), this is not the case for the Hebrew system: *im* freely occurs with all tenses (past, present, future, compound) and strongly favors the future; *lu* prefers the past, can appear in the compound and the present, and avoids the future, while *ilu/lule/ilule* appear exclusively in the past and compound tenses. Not surprisingly, the unmarked form *if* appears much more frequently than the marked form *whether*. In Hebrew, *im* is the most frequent form, followed by *ilu, lu* and *lule* have a similar frequency, and the most iconically complex form *ilule* has the lowest frequency of occurrence. This nonrandom distribution and collocation of conditionals and tenses and their relative frequencies (culled from a corpus of twelve texts of various styles and registers) is not arbitrary and has been discussed elsewhere (Tobin 1994:486-489).

No matter how we look at these systems, we cannot escape the fact that the same categorical label of conditionals is divided quite differently in English and Hebrew in the number and type of signals, the semantic features underlying the meanings of the signs comprising these language specific systems, and in their distribution and collocation. From the semiotic view of language, it is difficult to accept both systems as being equivalent even though all the Hebrew forms can be translated as '*if*', and even if both systems perform the same communicative function of presenting alternative ways of perceiving possibilities. If, as Saussure has taught us, everything in language is in a system of oppositions, then we should take these unique language specific oppositions into account before we make universal typological claims about "equivalent" crosslinguistic language categories.

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