

THE SEARCH FOR UNIVERSAL DESCRIPTIVE FRAMEWORKS IN PHONETICS AND PHONOLOGY

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Whereas Perlmutter based his discussion on just one example, the issue of segmental structure in ASL, the observations in Maddieson's paper were drawn from a sample of 14 descriptive grammars covering a broad typological and areal spectrum. He stated that these grammars "show a heavy bias towards a segmental view rather than alternatives, such as subsegmental features, representations on multiple overlapping tiers, or as gestures." Furthermore, he noted that the same information can often be provided in different formats and that phonologists are used to converting data from one theoretical framework to the other. Therefore he suggested that "the completeness and transparency of the description are more crucial than the theoretical model."

The moral to be drawn from this observation for the theme question could be that once the required amount of theory is there, the choice among competing descriptive frameworks might become more or less arbitrary in such a way that for pragmatic reasons one might prefer to stick to the de facto standard of segment inventories and syllable based phonotactics.

There are, however, two areas where even the best descriptive grammars in the sample provide less information than required for solid cross-linguistic work. One is the set of phenomena falling under a broadly conceived notion of prosody. Here a consensus model providing the required amount of theory for comparable description has not yet emerged. Therefore, Maddieson proposed as an interim solution to include exemplificatory phonetic contours of intonation patterns in descriptive grammars.

The other problematic area is strictly phonetic information. Due in part to the sociological distance between the phonetic and the linguistic subcultures in most academic communities, but also in part to the lacking consensus on the relation between phonological and phonetic phenomena, current descriptive grammars tend to omit strictly phonetic information like the realization of stress altogether. If, however, as Maddieson suggested and as probably most linguists accept, completeness and transparency of description is to be ranked higher that ease of comparison, then the descriptions of sound systems should include prosodic phonological as well as strictly phonetic data cast in any framework whatsoever rather than remain silent in these respects.

The emergence of a descriptive consensus in these areas continues to be a goal which due to ongoing work in prosodic theory and in the growing area of 'Field phonetics' (cf. Ladefoged & Maddieson 1995) can hopefully be reached in the near future.

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