

COMPARATIVE GRAMMAR WITHIN AND ACROSS MODALITIES

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Perlmutter's contribution started the symposium with a very challenging question of comparability, that between oral and signed languages. The issue he picked to illustrate the problem was the existence of segmental structure in American Sign Language (ASL, cf. Perlmutter 1992). Cross-modal comparability can of course be enhanced if we simply assume segmental structure for both. But is this adequate? Perlmutter said no: Assumptions like this should not be stipulated but investigated. Only if the investigation is successful, the assumption should be adopted. We can profitably compare sign and sound languages without assuming that both have segmental structure, but a closer look at the structure of signs shows that they cannot be described in a natural way without such an assumption. Perlmutter summarized:

"We did not assume the existence of segmental structure in ASL grammar, but showed that something is needed to account for the domain of Place features in ASL signs. The device that can do that corresponds to the theoretical notion of segment familiar from oral language phonology. S'il n'existe pas, il faudrait l'inventer."

Perlmutter introduced a dichotomous distinction between strategies for linguistic research: (a) Top-down linguistics: Linguists assume the existence of a large number of theoretical constructs and ask questions about a language framed in terms of those theoretical constructs. (b) Bottom-up linguistics: Linguists look at the data and generalizations internal to their language and ask what theoretical devices are needed to account for them.

Perlmutter took his example to be an argument for his strategic option (b), bottom-up linguistics, because it implies that the theoretical constructs in terms of which grammars are formulated must be each time constructed anew, based on evidence internal to each language. Otherwise, he said, our conclusions may turn out to be none other than our initial assumptions.

But once the theoretical constructs have been established as relevant and fruitful, one might add, they should be used for informative comparable descriptions. So maybe Perlmutter's bottom line can be stated as follows: It is not only important to investigate how much theory we must employ to arrive at comparable descriptions, but also how much theory we should employ to get interesting, comprehensive and transparent descriptions without indulging in speculation.