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TOWARDS A DESCRIPTIVE CONSENSUS FOR THEORETICAL DISSENSION

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Zaefferer claimed first that the goals of linguistics can be ordered in three ranks: (a) to describe languages, (b) to compare them, (c) to understand them, and that the respective prerequisites are: (a') individual description theories (weak d-theories), (b') general description theories (strong d-theories), and (c') explanatory theories (e-theories). There is no principled difference between d-theories (assumptions presupposed in linguistic descriptions) and e-theories (assumptions used for linguistic explanations); the former are built into descriptions, e.g. via terminological choices, by stipulation.

The background for the present symposium includes among others (a) Humboldt's dream: 'a general comparative grammar based on the firm ground of appropriately established leading ideas', (b) the famous "Lingua Descriptive Studies: Questionnnaire" (Comrie and Smith 1977) and the corresponding grammars, and (c) the "Framework for Descriptive Grammars" (Comrie et al. 1993, Zaefferer 1998). A lot remains still to be done (cf. e.g. Zaefferer 1995).

How do we create a firm ground of appropriately established leading ideas? There are three problems for Humboldt's dream to come true (cf. Zaefferer 1995a): (a) the comparability problem, (b) the theoretical bias problem, (c) the typological bias problem. Tackling the first one, we have to distinguish three kinds of comparison: (a) among languages, (b) among language descriptions (based on d-theories), (c) among (strong/explanatory) linguistic theories (e-theories). In solving these problems, two desiderata should be met: (a) Good descriptions should facilitate comparison both of languages and of theories. And (b) the best theories should win. The spiral of progress in linguistics could be accordingly be characterized as follows: From mere description ('symptomatics') via comparison ('differential diagnostics') to understanding ('diagnostics'); from there on to better description, better comparison, better understanding etc.

The big issue is to strike the right balance between deductive and inductive steps. From Greek mythology we know the epitome of inadequate treatment: Procrustes. Two Procrustean positions can be found in language description: (a) the Stretcher: His Background theory is too weak, so he 'overextends the guest'and overstates diversity among languages; (b) the Chopper: His background theory too strong, so he 'chops the guest's legs off' and understates diversity among languages.

Zaefferer extended Perlmutter's dichotomy of strategic options into a four-fold distinction (cf. above) by adding (c) Down-up linguistics: Linguists start with a large number of theoretical constructs and test if they are instantiated in the language under consideration, (Down-up

ISBN: 0 08 043 438X

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linguists still have some inclination towards becoming Choppers.) and (d) Up-down linguistics: Linguists look at the data and generalizations internal to their language and if some additional assumption is needed to account for the data, they check if it is provided by some stronger theory. (Up-down linguists should be the most preferred hosts.)

Zaefferer concluded with a plea for ecumenical descriptions and confessional theories and he argued that the best way to foster competition among e-theories is to agree on some d-theory. His argument went as follows: Let's assume falsifiability is a desideratum for empirical theories. Suppose then (i) T_1, ..., T_n are competing theories trying to explain the same set of data described in terms of their respective background theories T_1', ..., T_n'. Then this competition is clearly unfair against theory T_i and in favor of all other theories, if $T_i = T_i'$ ($i \neq n$), i.e. if T_i describes its data in its own terms, because then it is not falsifiable. It can only be criticized in terms of its bad descriptions. Suppose on the other hand (ii) T_1, ..., T_n are competing theories trying to explain the same set of data described in terms of their common background theory T'. Then this competition is clearly fair for all competing theories, if they all entail T', but none of them vice versa. Criticism can concentrate on the theory and not on the descriptions. In order to promote scenario (ii), a consensus on weak theories for good descriptions is needed, theories that are strong enough to make for sound universal comparison. This is what is meant by a descriptive consensus for explanatory dissension.

ISBN: 0 08 043 438X