

**DESCRIPTION AND COMPARISON.
HOW MUCH THEORY DO WE NEED
TO MAKE LANGUAGE DESCRIPTIONS
GLOBALLY COMPARABLE?**

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Abstract : Based on the assumption that in order to achieve a better understanding of human language one has to look at languages, describe them and compare them, the panelists explored different aspects of the role played by linguistic theory not only in its obvious place, in the explanation of general properties of language, but also in the underlying descriptive and comparative enterprises. David Perlmutter discussed the different strategies that are available in cross-modal comparison, dealing with signed languages on one hand and oral languages on the other. Ian Maddieson showed how common shortcomings in the phonetics-phonology section of descriptive grammars can be traced back to lack of consensus in theory, but also to interdisciplinary boundaries. Guglielmo Cinque pleaded for a flexible role of theory in description and comparison, whereas Edward Keenan argued that theory should be completely kept out of description. Ian Roberts sketched a theoretical framework for diachronic and comparative syntax that reduces theoretical stipulation to a minimum and Dietmar Zaefferer argued for a descriptive consensus for theoretical dissension in order to foster competition among theories and thereby advance our understanding of language.

Keywords : comparative grammar; cross-modal comparison; descriptive grammars; diachronic grammar; linguistic theory; field phonetics; signed languages; sound systems.

INTRODUCTION

The basic idea behind this symposium was to explore the possibility of separating out of the assumptions made by different theories of language a common denominator which would be strong enough to make descriptions of languages of any type comparable in such a way that competing theories can be contrasted and evaluated on the basis of how well they deal with the data so described. Its starting point was the truism that theoryless description is impossible because every description of a given language must be based on some set of assumptions which can be called an individual description theory (id-theory) for that language (not a descriptive theory *of* it; the latter is based on the former). Theories of language, however, - as opposed to theories of individual languages - tend to be much more ambitious. Instead of merely providing sets of assumptions required for description they make claims that intend to help us understand linguistic phenomena in general: Why languages are the way they are, how much they can differ from one another, how they can be acquired, why and how they change, etc.

When we speak of linguistic theory, we tend to think of these stronger and more interesting explanatory theories (e-theories). But theories of language are generalizations over individual languages, so cross-linguistic work is essential for establishing or rejecting or revising them. Descriptions of languages are necessary for language comparison, but not sufficient. What is needed are comparable descriptions, descriptions that use, among others, consistent terminology, in other words descriptions based on a general description theory (gd-theory). This is what the subtitle of this symposium means by a theory that is needed to make language descriptions globally comparable.

There are in principle two extreme options for answering the thematic question: One is to deny what has been called a truism above, i.e. that any theory is needed, the other one is to require as much theory as possible, i.e. a full-fledged explanatory theory of language even for merely descriptive purposes. Interestingly enough, both positions have been argued for on this symposium, the former by Edward Keenan and the latter, tendentially, by Ian Roberts.

Here are the summaries of the individual contributions