

Definition of Linguistic Union (Sprachbund)

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It is widely acknowledged that the discovery of linguistic unions (Sprachbünde) is attributed to N. S. Trubetzkoy (1928), who proposed distinguishing them from language families. According to his definition, a linguistic union is a group of languages that exhibit significant similarities in syntax, morphology, and sometimes external phonetic resemblance, and share a common fund of cultural vocabulary. However, they are not connected by a system of regular phonetic correspondences or an original elementary lexicon. The prototypical example is the Balkan linguistic union; its features are known as linguistic Balkanisms.

Trubetzkoy's definition does not imply the existence of regular correspondences between the languages comprising a linguistic union. A review of the issues related to the concepts of convergence in general and linguistic unions in particular concludes with a summary of the aporias arising from the vague definition of linguistic unions. Negative conclusions are drawn regarding the shortcomings of the term itself and the absence of a method for establishing linguistic unions as entities distinct from a random set of languages. Thus, in the end, unions “are established by linguists” (Wiemer 2020: 182–183). Overall, specialists in language contact are similarly pessimistic: they find it difficult to identify precisely those processes that led to the emergence of linguistic unions, so the question remains unresolved (Muysken 2013: 726). Pessimism regarding the heuristic value of the linguistic union concept in contact linguistics can partly be explained by the widespread uncritical acceptance of a priori postulates, such as “bilinguals tend to form a diasystem of the languages they use.” Observations of the speech behaviour and linguistic systems of bilinguals in Balkan linguistic situations refute this thesis (Sobolev (Ed.) 2021).

One of the main issues in contact linguistics is the question of whether it is possible to establish correlations and even regular causal relationships between a) external, i.e., social and anthropological parameters of a specific contact situation, b) material and structural features of the languages in contact, c) processes of language change in contact, and finally d) linguistic consequences, the results of contact, which are not always distinguishable from the results of internally motivated, independent development. However, in the course of studying the features of the Balkan linguistic union, no unique distinctive features of Balkan bilingualism and linguistic contact situations were found, nor was it possible to establish the conditioning of the development of Balkan languages by the observed characteristics of bilingualism and linguistic situations. It was found that the linguistic situation itself does not have predictive power for the expected (possible or obligatory) linguistic changes within its framework, and the diversity of contact situations is irrelevant for defining a linguistic union.

In light of the above, a new definition of a linguistic union and the development of a new methodology for determining its diagnostic features have become pertinent. The paper aims to address the theoretical question of rigorously proving, using the methods of the humanities, the existence of linguistic unions as distinct, convergent language groups. A hypothesis is proposed concerning regular functional correspondences (non-random coincidences in the rules of distribution of units and categories in different languages) between languages as a diagnostic feature of a linguistic union (it is known that in the theory of linguistic kinship, the presence of regular phonetic correspondences between languages is usually recognised as a diagnostic feature). Thus, it will be possible to determine whether linguistic unions are speculative constructs of linguists or an ontological reality, i.e., existing groups of languages connected by regular relationships.

References

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