Functional categories in comparative linguistics

Even after many decades of typological research, the biggest methodological problem still concerns the fundamental question: how can we be sure that we identify and compare the same linguistic form, structure, meaning etc. across languages? Very few linguistic categories, if any, appear to be ‘universal’ in the sense that they are attested in each and every language (Evans and Levinson 2009). The language-specific nature of form-based (structural, morphosyntactic) categories is well known, which is why typologists usually resort to ‘Greenbergian’, meaning-based categories. The use of meaning-based or semantic categories, however, does not necessarily result in the identification of cross-linguistically comparable data either, as was already shown by Greenberg (1966: 88) himself. Whereas formal categories are too narrow in that they do not cover all the structural variants attested across languages, semantic categories can be too wide, including too many structural variants to be useful for e.g. morphosyntactic typology. Furthermore, major typological word order studies after Greenberg (1966) have failed to keep formal and semantic categories apart in their attempt to account for cross-linguistic ordering tendencies (Rijkhoff 2009a).

Recent proposals to employ ‘concepts’ as the basis for cross-linguistic comparison (apparently conflating linguistic/semantic and non-linguistic/cognitive categories) have also met with considerable skepticism (Levinson 2007). Finally, the idea that visual stimuli can produce reliable data for cross-linguistic research is also not unproblematic, as several studies have suggested that there is no single, ‘neutral’ way in which visual input is processed across different languages and cultures (e.g. Lucy 1996, Evans 2009). Furthermore certain ‘ontological categories’ are language-specific (Malt 1995). For example, speakers of Kalam (New Guinea) do not classify the cassowary as a bird, because they believe it has a mythical kinship relation with humans (Bulmer 1967).

In this talk I will discuss the role of functional categories in comparative morphosyntactic research, a type of category that has hardly been taken into account so far. Functional categorization is not directly concerned with the formal or semantic properties of a constituent, but rather with the actual job of a linguistic form or construction in the process of verbal communication (in the tradition of the Prague School). I will argue that (a) functional categorization is methodologically prior to formal and semantic categorization (functional categories include semantic and formal categories) and (b) functional categories give better cross-linguistic ‘coverage’ then formal or semantic categories. Finally it will be shown that functional categories have their own distinct grammatical properties (Rijkhoff 2008, 2009b, forthcoming).

References