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Computational tools for cultural comparison

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Why do we need parameters?

Throughout the course of the book, we might have noticed how parameters are indeed important, maybe even crucial ingredients in creating the recipes for certain languages. Baker even notices that, accidentally or not, they always appear at the places within sentences where they seem to have the biggest impact at the sentence meaning. Therefore, the question can be asked – what parameters actually are and why do they exist?

As Baker remarks, most of those questions might yield the negative answer and everything we contribute to this debate is speculative. For every theory that appears and tries to explain the parametric property of languages, we can provide counterexamples that would refute our claim instantly.

One view is – parameters and their values reflect natural regularities at human minds. For example, Baker argues that children have innate characteristics that favor SVO form of sentence in preference to OSV. Let me further elaborate on why innate characteristics of language are important. The famous Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, argued that there is an arbitrary relation between the sign and the sound. Let us take for instance the word ‘dog’ and view it as a set of three sounds – ‘d’, ‘o’ and ‘g’. Obviously, there is nothing special about those sounds that would confirm that they are the ideal to use to describe an animal. However, humans set conventions and those conventions allow people within the culture to understand each other. The proof that people indeed have innate linguistic properties comes from the fact that everyone within the culture would know what ‘dog’ means but only a minority of people would be able to give an accurate and appropriate definition of that word.

However, the view that language and parameters are completely arbitrary doesn’t hold water for a simple and obvious reason – there is much more to language other than its lexicon. The grammar and semantics play the same part in understanding the language as knowing the lexicon of that language and those concepts can’t work properly if any of them is unfulfilled. For example, there are common sentences that satisfy the lexical and grammatical properties of English yet don’t mean anything because of semantics. Such sentence was constructed by Chomsky in his 1957 “Syntactic Structures”: “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.” Although this kind of sentence satisfies the grammatical and lexical requirement, it doesn’t make sense semantically and therefore doesn’t convey any message. Therefore, we can’t learn language unless we understand what it means, and this is possible if and only if we are familiar with the lexicon, grammar and semantics of that language.

In this chapter of the book, Baker discusses the general narrative outside of the formal linguistics that languages differ, like cultures, simply because local traditions are passed onto children through processes of learning and acculturation. However, he argues that this is not a case and that language is much more than a simple cultural concept and actually can’t be explained in terms of culture only. As his counterargument, he uses the fact that grammar isn’t correlated to any other cultural feature. In other words, that narrative doesn’t hold water because the culture of one group is much more similar to the culture of the neighbors than to culture that is placed on the other part of the world but has an unrelated language with a similar grammatical structure.

Additionally, in this chapter Baker tries to refute the claims that there exists a link between the grammatical properties in parameters and ecological properties in the environment where the language is spoken. He argues that every language in fact has same expressive power and what he called “fitness”. Therefore, the fact that the language is head-first doesn’t make it more suitable to living in a larger city or to a discussion about sports, for example. While there are examples where certain languages can express phenomena in their close proximity quicker than other ones, that doesn’t mean that other languages can’t convey the same message in slightly more words. Take for instance the fact that the Albanian language has 27 words for different types of moustache and eyebrows. While Albanians possess an extraordinarily rich lexicon to describe any type of moustache in one word, we must observe that English can do the same, with the exception that it needs to use more words to convey the same message.

Finally, parameters are accidents of evolutional history, as Pinker and Bloom would argue. They evolved through history, be it as a consequence of conquests, wars and isolation or as a consequence of people trying to add stylistic notes to their messages (Old English – Middle English). Baker argues that parameters are there to maximize differences in E-language without affecting I-language. People have differences in their linguistic principles and these differences are compensated by how people set parameters.