

## Primary universals of human language

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It is a great puzzle that although we instinctively 'know' what language is, it is surprisingly difficult to nail down concrete, incontrovertible universals. Some researchers (Evans and Levinson 2009) have claimed that linguistic diversity is largely unconstrained by strong language universals, and Greenberg's seminal (1966) study found few if any absolute universals.

However, if we hear people chatting in an unfamiliar foreign tongue, although we cannot understand what they are saying, we sense they are using a human language like ours in a way that we do not with the whistles of dolphins, songs of birds, dances of bees or vocalisation of chimpanzees (cf. Hockett 1960).

It is astonishing that human languages can appear outwardly so different in their phonology/sign, grammar and vocabulary, yet any human child can learn any human language without instruction, providing ample and repeated evidence that universals must be present. Why, then, cannot linguistics identify clear universals when informally we can easily recognise the commonality of language and learning language is child's play?

A valid theory of language should be based on a wide range of languages, without geographical or cultural bias. African and Australian languages offer a unique and important perspective on human language. Spoken by the oldest modern human population, African languages are of primary significance. Conversely, Australian languages are significant as a result of the long migration of modern humans from Africa to Australia.

Greenberg wrote that 'we would prefer to have as few universals as possible ... to deduce them from as small a number of general principles as possible'. My research goal is to attempt to put forward primary universals of language that can account for both the universality of human language and its diversity — for the universals that must be there, and for the obvious diversity that we find.