



# Theoretical approaches to universals, variation, and the phonetics/phonology distinction: an introduction



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## ABSTRACT

Different approaches to universals and variation are discussed in the context of a distinction, proposed by [Burton-Roberts \(2000\)](#), between a generic conception of the notion 'language', in which the study of language is the study of human languages (such as English and French), and a naturalistic conception, in which 'language' is used to denote a biological entity, a specifically linguistic innate module of mind, distinct from socio-political entities such as French and English. This is related to the notion of structural analogy, and to the status and role of corpora and intuitive well-formedness judgments in phonology. It is also related to the notion of the grounding of syntax and phonology.

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## 1. Introduction

This section of our volume dedicated to Jacques Durand deals with conceptual and empirical issues in the domain of phonological universals and phonological variation, which I relate to the status and role of intuitive well-formedness judgments and corpora in the discipline of phonology. I relate these, in turn, to the idea of the putative modularity of linguistic knowledge and the question of whether linguistics in general, and phonology in particular, should be seen as an autonomous discipline, or whether linguistic investigation should be seen as necessarily interdisciplinary in nature. Although I am obliged, in this essay, to discuss the issues in a linear sequence of subsections, the issues are all inter-related in complex ways, so that the inter-relations resemble a web, rather than a linear list. I begin, in Section 1 of this introduction, by considering some of the conceptual issues related to the notion of linguistic universals in general and phonological universals in particular (put this way, I am presupposing that phonological universals are *linguistic* universals; I return to this below). I discuss two opposing conceptions of 'language', and thus of 'linguistic universals', and their implications for phonological investigation.

The first conception of 'language' is the Chomskian *naturalistic* conception, according to which the term 'language' denotes a biologically constituted, innate, mental module, quite distinct from the socio-politically constituted constructs known as specific languages (e.g. 'French' and 'English') subsumed, for Chomsky, under the notion 'E-language' (see [Carr \(2003\)](#) for a critique of Chomsky's position). The second is what I will call, following [Burton-Roberts \(2000, 2009, in preparation\)](#), the *generic* conception, which I identify with the work of [Greenberg \(1963 and elsewhere\)](#) and [Jakobson \(1941 and elsewhere\)](#). Related to this, I then proceed, in Section 2, to a discussion of the inter-related notions of (a) the putative 'grounding' of linguistic knowledge, especially phonological knowledge (assuming that phonological knowledge is *linguistic* knowledge; again, see below), (b) the putative 'modularity' of phonological knowledge, and (c) the notion of structural analogy between phonology and syntax, a notion proposed by John M. Anderson (e.g. [Anderson and Jones, 1974](#)), developed by him in [Anderson \(2011\)](#) and in his contribution to this volume (see [Anderson, 2006](#); [Carr, 2005, 2006](#) for discussion of structural analogy in relation to Chomskian universalism). Having discussed, in Section 1, the Chomskian conception of universalism and its relationship to variation, I then consider, in Section 3, non-Chomskian variationist and usage-based

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approaches to phonological knowledge. Variationist and usage-based approaches naturally lead to interdisciplinarity in phonological investigation; I discuss this in Section 3. In Section 4, I focus on the status of intuitive linguistic judgments and the role of corpora in the investigation of universals and variation. I suggest here that much mainstream generative phonology is based on a generic interpretation of Chomskian universalism. I will call this ‘generic generativism’. Generic generativists, I suggest, adopt generativist models of phonological organisation in their various guises (such as rule-based, derivational SPE phonology, and constraint-based, non-derivational Optimality Theory) while assuming, implicitly or otherwise, that phonological universals are arrived at by inspecting as wide a range as possible of the world’s languages.

I consider here the increasingly large rôle played by corpora in phonological investigation, focusing on two large phonological corpora: *La phonologie du français contemporain* (PFC: see Detey et al., 2010; Durand 2006; Durand et al., 2003, 2009) and *La phonologie de l’anglais contemporain* (PAC: see Carr et al., 2004). We will see that the significance of the data in question is interpreted differently in the contributions by Laks and Scheer. I discuss some of those different interpretations in this introductory essay.

## 2. On the notion ‘linguistic universals’

The notion of ‘linguistic universals’ has a long and complex history (see the contributions by Thomas and by Hutton to Kibbee, 2010 for discussion of some of the general issues; see too Durand 1995 for discussion of universalism in phonology). As stated earlier, I will focus on the relationship between universalism and the phenomenon of linguistic variation, specifically phonological variation, exemplified by data from English and French (see below on different interpretations of the relationship between the concepts ‘linguistic’ and ‘phonological’). In this introductory essay, I will begin by distinguishing between two broadly different conceptions of ‘language’, and thus of ‘linguistic universals’. I will then examine the way these conceptions have been appealed to in 20th-century linguistics, particularly with respect to phonological variation.

As indicated above, the two broadly different conceptions of ‘language’ in question are what Burton-Roberts (2000) calls the ‘generic’ and the ‘naturalistic’ conceptions. I now spell out in a little more detail how those conceptions differ. Under the generic conception, the term ‘language’ is taken to be a generic term, a cover term, for all specific human languages, such as French, English or Swahili. On this conception of ‘language’, the study of language is the study of languages, and linguistic universals are universals which range over the set of human languages. Some such universals can be interpreted as commonly-occurring phenomena or tendencies, such as (in the domain of phonetics and phonology) assimilation phenomena, including nasal assimilation, in which nasal stops assimilate for place of articulation to a following obstruent, or vowel nasalisation, in which vowels become nasalised before a following nasal stop. In the domain of syntax, generalisations about, for instance, word order, or relative clause structures, or passive constructions, can be arrived at by observing commonly occurring patterns across the worlds’ languages, again appealing to the generic conception of language. Under this conception, in both phonology and syntax, the linguist postulates either robust universals (attested in every human language), or, more likely, universal tendencies (including implicational tendencies), on the basis of observing as wide a range as possible of human languages. I suggest that Jakobsonian universals (Jakobson, 1941) and Greenbergian universals (Greenberg, 1963) are based on the generic conception of language, and that this kind of approach to universals is essentially inductive in nature: by inspecting particular languages, we arrive at general claims about, for instance, marked and unmarked patterns in human language. Those who seek to establish grounding for such tendencies, such as Anderson (2013), often appeal to general facts about human cognition, subsuming facts about human articulation, perception (such as the perception of figure vs ground), perceptual salience, neural mechanisms and other general features of human cognition, such as the capacities for categorisation, inductive generalisation and analogical generalisation. Given that notions such as ‘French’, ‘Spanish’ or ‘English’ are socio-political in nature, being intimately tied up with the history of nation states, the generic conception of linguistic universals is intimately connected to language seen as a cultural phenomenon, subtended by both general and specific features of human cognition. Specific languages are also the locus of conventionality; scholars who adopt (explicitly or otherwise) the generic conception of language are thus likely to assign conventionality a central role in their view of language (again, see Anderson, 2013, on conventionalization in language and Carr, 2011 for discussion of social conventions and phonological knowledge).

The naturalistic conception of language can be found in the work of Noam Chomsky, in which the object of linguistic inquiry is said to be a real object in the natural (biological) world, an expression of the genes. It is said to be an innate module of mind, containing purely formal principles (divorced from considerations of communicative function) and a formal computational procedure operating over purely formal, mentally represented symbols. The term ‘the language faculty’ has been used by Chomsky for this putative mental module, as has the term ‘the faculty of language’ and ‘the language organ’ (see Laks, 2013 for critical discussion of this notion, in its various interpretations). Chomsky used to use the term ‘Universal Grammar’ (UG) for both the faculty of language (understood in the Chomskian sense) and the study of that faculty. He now reserves the term ‘UG’ for the study, not the object, but many linguists still use the term ‘UG’ for the putative language module. By ‘module’ here is meant the kind of informationally-encapsulated, domain-specific mental faculty postulated by Fodor (1983). By ‘mentally represented’, I intend what Burton-Roberts (2000) calls ‘C-representation’, where the ‘C’ denotes ‘constitutive’; Chomsky’s postulated mental representations are not representations of anything mind-external: they are *strictly* mind-internal. A complicating factor here is that Chomsky uses the misleading term ‘internalized’ when he speaks

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