

At the crossroads of typology and language(s) in use

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A long-standing issue in linguistic typology concerns the relationship between cross-linguistic generalization and the empirical foundations on which such generalizations are built. Typological research necessarily relies on abstraction: comparative concepts are designed to enable systematic comparison across languages while remaining independent from language-particular descriptive categories (Croft 2001; Haspelmath 2010). At the same time, an increasing number of typological studies draw on *naturally occurring data*: typology has increasingly aligned itself with usage-based and corpus-informed perspectives, motivated by the recognition that grammatical structure is shaped by frequency, discourse function, interactional context, and social embedding (Biber 1995; Bybee 2010; Levinson 2016). The resulting methodological and epistemological question is not whether abstraction is required (typology cannot proceed without it) but how abstractions should be calibrated when linguistic structures are examined in situated use.

Variationist sociolinguistics is one of the branches of linguistics that has given more attention to language in use (also from a methodological perspective, see Tagliamonte 2006 inter al.). However, these strands of research have so far only sporadically been integrated in a systematic manner (e.g. Kortmann 2003, Trudgill 2011, Ballarè & Inglese 2023, Sinnemäki 2020), despite the well-established observation that “the patterns of variation and change found in [...] a particular language are in many cases simply instances of patterns of variation and change found across languages” (Croft 2022: 27).

The contributions assembled in this issue of *Linguistic Typology at the Crossroads* approach this question from complementary empirical and theoretical perspectives. On the one hand, several papers pursue typological analysis that is explicitly anchored in naturally occurring data, examining how cross-linguistic generalizations are affected when categories and comparisons are grounded in attested usage. On the other hand, the issue includes studies of intralinguistic variation—sometimes drawing on variationist sociolinguistic frameworks—that take variation itself as an empirical window onto grammatical organization; patterns of variation are used to formulate and test generalizations that bear on typological comparison and explanatory modeling. Together, these perspectives invite reflection on how typological generalizations are constructed, evaluated, and interpreted when both cross-linguistic and intralinguistic evidence are incorporated.

Typological generalization and usage-sensitive evidence. Several papers in this issue revisit classic typological domains (such as clause combining, mood and modality, grammatical alternations, and (morpho)syntactic complexity) through systematic analyses of naturally occurring data. A recurring outcome is that patterns often treated as categorical in broad typological overviews display gradedness and probabilistic conditioning once their distribution across comparable usage contexts is examined. This difference is not merely a matter of data quantity, but of evidential type: naturally occurring data foreground optionality, competition among constructions, and skewed frequency profiles that remain largely invisible in elicited or decontextualized data.

These findings sharpen a familiar tension in typology. Explanatory adequacy requires abstraction, yet empirical adequacy requires sensitivity to how forms and functions cluster in use. If typological categories are defined independently of usage conditions, cross-linguistic comparison risks aligning formally similar labels while overlooking functionally distinct distributions; conversely, if comparison is reduced to local distributional profiles, typology risks losing the generality it aims to achieve. The papers in this issue point toward a productive middle position: comparative concepts remain indispensable, but they benefit from being distributionally grounded, that is, tied to attestation conditions, contextual predictors, and frequency-sensitive diagnostics.

From this perspective, frequency effects, register differentiation, and asymmetries in optionality are not noise to be controlled away, but part of what typology must

explain. Usage-based regularities can illuminate why some constructions become cross-linguistically robust, why others remain marginal, and how functional pressures and processing constraints shape grammatical systems over time (cf. Hawkins 2004; Bybee 2010).

Typology, evidence, and the status of explanation. At a more general level, the discussion raised by the contributions in this issue bears directly on the status of explanation in linguistic typology. Typological explanation has traditionally relied on identifying recurrent cross-linguistic patterns and relating them to functional, cognitive, diachronic, or areal factors. While the distinction between descriptive categories and comparative concepts remains fundamental, the nature of the empirical evidence supporting typological explanations has often remained implicit.

The increasing availability of naturally occurring data brings this issue to the foreground, particularly in approaches that model linguistic structure as emerging from usage and distributional regularities (see Du Bois 1985; Levshina 2022). When typological claims are supported by frequency distributions, interactional contingencies, or socially stratified usage patterns, explanation must extend beyond abstract structural possibilities to include the observed preferences and constraints attested in actual language use. In this sense, naturally occurring data function as a testing ground for typological hypotheses, allowing researchers to assess the robustness of generalizations across registers, interactional settings, and speaker populations.

Typology thus increasingly operates at the interface between structural comparison and empirical modeling of linguistic behavior, as reflected in recent work on distributional and token-based typology (Bickel 2015; Levshina 2019). Far from weakening typological explanation, this shift aligns explanatory claims more closely with observable linguistic behavior and enhances their empirical accountability.

Discourse, interaction, and the emergence of structure. A further cluster of contributions foregrounds discourse and interaction as central sites for the emergence and stabilization of typologically relevant structure. Research in interactional linguistics and conversation analysis has long emphasized that grammar is not merely reflected in discourse, but is partly constituted through recurrent sequential environments and turn design (Hopper 1987; Schegloff 2007; Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018).

This perspective has several implications for typological modeling. First, it challenges sentence-centered assumptions in domains where the relevant unit of organization may instead be the turn, the turn-constructive unit, or multi-unit sequences. Second, it foregrounds prosody and temporality as integral components of grammatical organization rather than extragrammatical phenomena. Third, it provides access to intermediate and emergent structures that are crucial for understanding grammaticalization pathways and structural diversification.

Discourse-sensitive analyses thus expand the empirical reach of typology by revealing strategies and constraints that remain opaque in elicited data or exclusively written sources. In doing so, they contribute to a deeper understanding of how typologically comparable structures develop, stabilize, and diverge.

Variation, social anchoring, and typological structure. A point of convergence across the contributions concerns the integration of variation and social structure into typological inquiry. Typological datasets have often treated languages as internally uniform systems; yet decades of variationist sociolinguistics have demonstrated that linguistic structure is systematically shaped by speaker communities, styles, registers, and social meanings (Labov 1972; Eckert 2008). If typology aims to characterize what a language is like, it must also ask for whom, in which settings, and under which communicative pressures.

From a typological perspective, this entails recognizing that variation is a potential source of explanatory insight, particularly when modeled quantitatively across socially defined varieties (Wälchli 2009; Trudgill 2011). On the one hand, it can reveal competing constraints and latent options within grammatical systems, on the other hand socially conditioned distributions shed light on processes of diffusion, stabilization, and restriction. Treating variation as structured evidence thus broadens typology's explanatory scope and improves the comparability of findings across languages, corpora, and communities.

Linguistic Typology at the Crossroads as an editorial space. The orientation emerging from this issue is closely aligned with the editorial positioning of *Linguistic Typology at the Crossroads*. From its inception, the journal has aimed to function as a venue for dialogue rather than as a platform tied to a single theoretical framework. The notion of *crossroads* is therefore not understood as a transitional metaphor, but

as an analytical space in which different approaches to linguistic comparison can meet under shared standards of empirical and theoretical explicitness.

Within this editorial vision, typology is conceived as a field that benefits from methodological plurality, provided that such plurality is accompanied by careful reflection on data, categories, and inferential practices (Schnell & Schiborr 2022). The present issue exemplifies this orientation, bringing together heterogeneous contributions that share the aim of systematically accounting for intralinguistic variation within typological research, and conversely of integrating typological perspectives into the study of variation.

From a methodological standpoint, the contribution by Di Garbo et al. highlights the need for a greater social anchoring of linguistic typology, while Mattiola proposes a method arguing for a discourse-sensitive typology. Evans et al. present a typologically grounded case study based on corpus data, whereas Mithun, and Maschler & Polak-Yitzhaki investigate spoken-language phenomena in a way that enables typological comparison.

Other contributions adopt a clearly variationist perspective –such as those by Tagliamonte, Vietti & Cerruti, and Digesto– while employing analytical tools that facilitate dialogue with typological approaches. Finally, Ballarè et al., using a methodology typical of language variation studies, analyze a phenomenon attested in spoken data from a distinctly typological perspective, while Van Hoey et al. challenge some assumptions on synonymy and linguistic complexity through corpus-based data.

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