# _This Week's Citation Classic_ ®

In all major aspects of language we find a hierarchy of preference within specific categories. The preferred member is called unmarked, the disfavored, marked. This hierarchy is shown by a cluster of distinguishing characteristics that is similar in phonology, grammar, and lexicon. An example is number in the noun in English in which the unmarked singular has zero and the plural _s_, the singular has greater text frequency, etc. The same categories show the same characteristics involving the same criteria across languages. The study of marking hierarchies can thus be incorporated into the theory of language universals. [The _SSCI_® and the _A&HCI_® indicate that this book has been cited in more than 125 publications.]

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## Basic Asymmetries in Linguistic Structures

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The emphasis on generalization across languages (language universals), as against the earlier notion in American structural linguistics of the diversity and incommensurability of individual languages, is dominant in contemporary linguistics.

Although, as always, there are historical antecedents, the modern interest in the topic of language universals arose as an unplanned and major outcome of the summer seminar at the University of Indiana in 1953, sponsored by the recently formed Committee on Linguistics and Psychology of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). As a first step, a psychologist gave a series of lectures on psychology and a linguist on linguistics. The latter assignment fell to me, and I described, with some pride, the rigorous methods developed by linguists for analyzing any language by isolating basic units of sound (phonemes) and meaning (morphemes) and then building up a description by rules of permitted combinations of these units.

When I had finished, one of the psychologists, Charles Osgood of Illinois, made a comment that I can now only reproduce approximately. "What you say is very impressive, but if you could tell me some things which are true about all languages, that would interest a psychologist." This remark stimulated much of my subsequent career. I suddenly realized that the only generalizations of contemporary linguistics were those of methodology. When we had all these rigorously (or so we thought) constructed grammars, what would we do with them?

What could we say about the languages themselves rather than the mere methodology of describing them?

Subsequently, under my chairmanship the SSRC committee sponsored a conference on language universals at Dobbs Ferry in 1961 at which I presented a paper mainly concerned with cross-linguistic universals of word order, which is generally recognized as the seminal paper in relation to the modern interest in language universals.[1]

The present work grew out of a series of four invited lectures given at the Summer Linguistic Institute at Bloomington in 1964. In it I tried to systematize the theory of marked and unmarked categories developed by the Prague school of linguistics in the 1930s by reference to language universals. The basic theory involved the notion that across languages there exists a cluster of similar properties that shows a hierarchy of preferences among the values of the same category, whether the category is found in phonology, grammar, or lexicon. The criteria are equitable across these different aspects of language, and the same hierarchy of preferences is shown in specific categories in different languages. As a grammatical example, the singular is favored over the plural in English in that the singular is indicated by zero while the plural has an overt marker; the singular has a greater text frequency and the same preference is shown by still other criteria.

The book seeks to define all the criteria and show the bases on which they are equitable in different aspects of language. A large number of categories are considered from this point of view. Then the question is raised as to why the criteria cluster and why certain features are favored over others by these criteria. In a final section, the area of kinship terminology is investigated and marking hierarchies are distinguished. For example, consanguineal terms are unmarked as against affinal.

This volume is still considered the basic source on the universalistic aspects of marking theory and has been the starting point of much subsequent work. One example is the volume that grew out of a conference on markedness held at Milwaukee, in which it is frequently cited and discussed.[2] Another earlier example is a by now classic paper on sibling terminology in kinship.[3] In addition the book contains the results of psycholinguist experiments by Greenberg and Jenkins on the psychological correlates of marking, which has stimulated subsequent research in this area.

1. **Greenberg J H.** Some universals of grammar with special reference to the order of meaningful elements.
    (Greenberg J H, ed.) _Universals of language._ Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963. p. 58-90. (Cited 120 times.)
2. **Eckman R, Moravcsik E A & Wirth J,** eds. _Markedness._ New York: Plenum Press, 1986.
3. **Nerlove S & Romney A K.** Sibling terminology and cross-sex behavior. _Amer. Anthropol._ 69:179-87, 1967.
    (Cited 30 times.)