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ON THE NECESSITY OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO LANGUAGE UNIVERSALS

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14.1. Toward an Interdisciplinary Theory of Language Universals

There is considerable variation across the languages of the world, nonetheless it is possible to discern common patterns in how languages are structured and used. The underlying source of this variation as well as the nature of crosslinguistic universals is the focus of much debate across different areas of linguistics. Some linguists suggest that language universals derive from the inner workings of Universal Grammar (UG)—a set of innate constraints on language acquisition (e.g., see Bever, Chapter 6; Hornstein & Boeckx, Chapter 5; and Pinker & Jackendoff, Chapter 7). Others see universals as emerging from patterns of language use, primarily because of processes taking place over diachronic rather than synchronic timescales (Bybee, Chapter 2; Hawkins, Chapter 4). Yet, other linguists propose that universals may derive from some combination of language acquisition and use (Hurford, Chapter 3). Even within the same theoretical linguistic framework, there is often little agreement about what the exact universals are. For example, when surveying specific universals proposed by different proponents of UG, Tomasello (2004) found little overlap between proposed universals.

We believe that a resolution to this debate is unlikely to be forthcoming from within linguistics itself; instead, it must be sought by adopting an interdisciplinary approach to language universals, integrating linguistic insights with those of other relevant disciplines. Thus, we need to understand the possible biological bases for language universals (see Clark & Misyak, Chapter 12; Finlay, Chapter 13; and Müller, Chapter 11, for discussion), their potential psychological underpinnings (Bever, Chapter 6), and how they may relate to semantics, computation, and learnability