



The Vision

At CASTL, we investigate one of the most important properties of the human mind, namely the language faculty.

Our investigations explore how languages vary. Research shows that cross-linguistic variation is not arbitrary; rather, it displays interesting patterns. Our goal is to understand such patterns as an interplay between universal and language specific factors. The universal factors which emerge from such study may themselves be rooted in properties of human cognition. Hence, to study language is to study a potential which is unique to humans and

uniform across our species.

Some properties of the human language faculty can be observed through detailed studies of individual languages. Other properties emerge through the method of microcomparison. This involves comparing closely related languages or dialects to achieve something like a controlled experiment. As many factors as possible are held constant while the effects of a single variable feature are examined.

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However, in-depth studies of individual languages and closely related languages cannot answer questions about the extent of linguistic variation. Im-

portant discoveries have been made through a large-scale typological approach in which characteristics of many languages are catalogued. Patterns and implicational tendencies across languages are then identified and used to inform

the construction of linguistic theory. Even though the number of meticulous language descriptions is growing, many more are needed before this approach can rest on a sufficiently representative sample of the world's languages.

In order to address some of the shortcomings of the above approaches, CASTL is committed to advancing a

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newer method called selective global comparison. In selective global comparison, the number of languages investigated is held strategically low. Various features are kept constant across

the sample, as with micro-comparative studies. At the same time, a balanced areal and genetic distribution of languages is sought, as with the typological studies. Our hope is that selective global comparison will give a better picture of the extent to which languages can vary. The results will be strong predictions about the nature of the human language faculty.

Once we have a significant body of reliable empirical generalizations, we employ the basic methodologies of formal linguistics to interpret them. These generalizations will capture interdependencies among the components underlying natural language. The next step is to explain these generalizations: Why do these interdependencies hold? What is the nature of the cognitive system combining primitive grammatical elements into complex linguistic expressions? How

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does this system yield linguistic universals?

Unsolved riddles about the human mind may be answered through the study of linguistic variation. But variation also presents social and political

challenges. It is a source of inequality, since millions of people speak languages which have little social prestige, have no written standard, and are never used in education. Yet every language or dialect has a unique combination of properties,

which is irretrievably lost if it dies out.

These challenges demand a response from linguists. We must contribute to practical applications of our research. These may include language planning, language documentation, the development of new techniques for language learning, and the creation and standardization of writing systems.

We also have a responsibility to bring the results of our research into public discussions. CASTL's commitments include raising

awareness about the value of linguistic diversity and the legitimacy of all human languages. In this way, we hope to contribute to solutions for the linguistic challenges that are vitally important for our world today.

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