Universals in cognitive theories of language
commentary to Evans and Levinson to appear in BBS

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Abstract:

1. A science of cognition needs falsifiable theories.

2. In a theory of cognition, a universal principle is a property true of all human minds – a cog-universal – not a superficial descriptive property true of the expressions of all languages – a des-universal.
3a. Counterexamples to des-universals are not counterexamples to cog-universals.

\[ \text{wh} \]

\[ \text{wh \; des} \]
Chinese behaves like English

\[ \text{wh} \]

\[ \text{wh} \]

cog-

\[ \text{wh} \]

3b. There are two types of cog-universals: Architectural and specific universals.
4a. Optimality Theory (OT), mentioned in the article as a promising direction, contains the strongest architectural and specific universals currently available within generative grammar.

4b. OT’s cog-universals yield theories of cross-linguistic typology that generally predict the absence of des-universals.

5. Language is more a biological trait than a cultural construct.
References


