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Foreword

Comparative linguistics is a discipline that seeks to answer some fundamental questions about language: why do languages differ to the extent that they do, and why are some languages more similar, in particular respects, than others? What are the limits to linguistic diversity, and what are the relevant parameters that define it? How do genetic, areal and typological factors contribute to global linguistic diversity, and how do these factors interact? We are only slowly beginning to understand the proper ways of addressing these questions, and we are still very far from having plausible answers to them, but the spectacular development of all branches of comparative linguistics (i.e. typological, areal, and genetic linguistics) give us hope that eventually the answers will be found.

The five papers contained in the present volume of *Suvremena lingvistika* certainly do not address these important and far-fetched questions directly, but they illustrate the wide application of methods of contemporary comparative linguistics, and show how comparative approach to linguistic phenomena sheds new light on problems in historical, descriptive, and theoretical linguistics. Diana Forker presents us with an important empirical contribution to the understanding of nominal morphology of the Tsezic branch of Nakh–Daghestanian languages, many of which have been inadequately described in the past. Parallels are drawn with similar morphological patterns in Dravidian languages, but the Tsezic system of nominal stem formation remains very unusual from the typological point of view. Tena Gnjatović’s article shows how insights into the opposition of alienable vs. inalienable possession, which is grammaticalized in many non–Indo–European languages, help us understand pragmatic preferences in the employment of possessive adjectives and possessive genitives in Plautine Latin. Frederik Kortlandt’s paper on tonogenesis shows that important issues in historical Baltic and Slavic accentology can be better understood if one looks at the development of tone oppositions in Athabaskan languages. The present writer’s contribution is a description of the causative construction in Kabardian, a NW Caucasian language, and of the ways in which this construction interacts with reflexivization. It attempts to show the relevance of Kabardian data to the theoretical issues of the status of independent NPs in head-marking languages, and the universal domain of case assignment. Finally, Vittorio Tomelleri’s paper on aspectology shows the striking parallels between the aspectual system of Ossetic, an Iranian language spoken on the Caucasus, and the better-known Slavic aspectual systems. The relevance of these similarities for diachronic typology of aspectual systems, as well as for the linguistic prehistory of Slavic, should not be underestimated.

It is hoped that this small collection of articles will contribute towards attracting more scholars to the comparative approach to languages, especially the small and endangered languages that need to be studied now, before they become extinct. Unless comparative linguists do their share of work today, tomorrow there may be nothing left to compare.

Zagreb, June 10, 2010

Ranko Matasović