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Haspelmath (2020) *General linguistics must be based on universals (or nonconventional aspects of language)*

VS.

Adger (2021) *On doing theoretical linguistics: a reply to Haspelmath*

Grammatikseminariet, Lund

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*Henrik Rosenkvist*



Martin Haspelmath



David Adger



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET  
INST FÖR SVENSKA SPRÅKET

# Disposition

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- En axiomatisk skillnad, s. 19-21
- Problem med alternativet - lingvistiska universalier, s. 22-25

# Bakgrund

## *Martin Haspelmath*

Tysk lingvist/typolog. Född 1963, disputerade 1993: *A grammar of Lezgian*. Sedan 1998: Senior Researcher, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, and Honorary Professor, Leipzig.

Google scholar: 9 040 träffar, 28 878 citat.

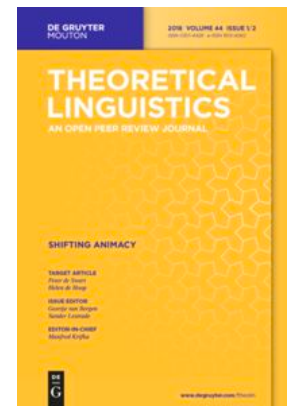
## *David Adger*

Skotsk lingvist. Född 1967, disputerade 1994 (med Elisabet Engdahl som handledare): *Functional heads and interpretation*. Sedan 2002: Queen Mary University, London. Köpte *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* vid 16 års ålder.

Google scholar: 2 310 träffar, 6 080 citat.

# Bakgrund

- Haspelmath (2020): General linguistics must be based on universals (or nonconventional aspects of language). Ska publiceras i *Theoretical Linguistics*.



Denna text är kritisk mot det generativa programmet och har redan fått repliker.

- David Adger (2021): On doing theoretical linguistics: a reply to Haspelmath. LingBuzz.
- Roberta D'Alessandro (2021): Not everything is a theory. A reply to Martin Haspelmath. LingBuzz.
- Balthasar Bickel (2021): Beyond universals and particulars in language: a reply to Haspelmath. LingBuzz.
- Jose-Luis Mendivil-Giro (2021): On the innate building blocks of language and scientific explanation. A reply to Haspelmath. LingBuzz.

# Haspelmaths kritik

Det finns en grundläggande paradox för allmän lingvistik:

Haspelmath: “The general linguistics paradox:

We want to explore and understand the nature of Human Language, but what we can observe directly is particular languages.”

- First solution: Nonconventional aspects of Human Language. *marginellt, irrelevant*
- Second solution: General linguistics through worldwide language comparison. “[...] no need for a “deep” or “true” analysis, but basically any description that *fruktbart, välprövat* facts right (that is observationally adequate) is sufficient as a basis for comparison”.
- Third solution: General linguistics based on a natural-kinds programme for *problematiskt* building blocks of languages [det generativa forskningsprogrammet].

# Haspelmaths kritik

- Analyser som bygger på universella lingvistiska teorier kan inte bli lika detaljerade/precisa som analyser som bygger på språkspecifika generaliseringar. Varje språk är unikt. Kravet på universalitet gör de analytiska verktygen trubbiga.

Haspelmath: “If one wants to make claims about Human Language, one needs to base them on universals - either absolute universals, such as the fact that all languages can express topics and comments (Krifka 2008) or the fact that all languages have demonstratives (Diessel 2014), or on strong tendencies [...].

The reason why I am emphasizing this here is that in recent decades, there has been a strong tendency to base general claims on the study of particular languages, or on a small non-representative set of languages, rather than on language universals. For example, Adger et al. (2009) mostly study Kiowa, and Pesetsky (2013) mostly studies Russian, but works like these of course make very general claims. The methodological background of this approach is not as naive as Antoine de Rivarol’s claims about the universality of French, but I will argue that many linguists have not considered all the implications when they claim that their study of one or a few languages can make a contribution to general linguistics.”

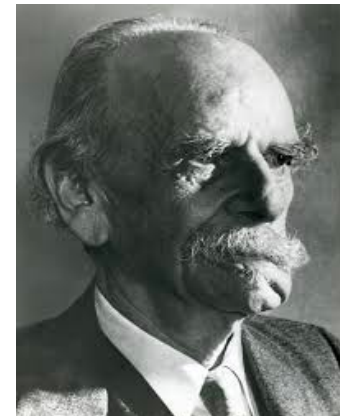
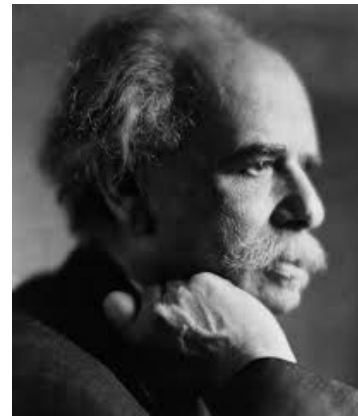
# Haspelmaths kritik

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Haspelmath: “While generative linguists who study a single language cannot contribute to general linguistics without subscribing to a natural-kinds programme of some kind, the situation is quite different for linguists who are happy to describe each language in its own terms, in the Boasian tradition. They need not endorse an inherently unlikely proposal about an innate grammar blueprint, but their work does not automatically contribute to general linguistics. Their work is particular-theoretical, not general-theoretical [...].”



Franz Boas  
1858-1942



# Haspelmaths kritik

- Det generativa forskningsprogrammet har ingen tydlig metodologi och inga tydliga kriterier för progression.

Haspelmath: “However, there is a serious problem: **In contrast to the Greenbergian programme for cross-linguistic comparison, the natural-kinds programme has no clear methodology for progressing, and no clear criteria for success.** There are a large number of new proposals about the building blocks of the innate grammar blueprint, but there is little (if any) convergence among them. **There is no agreement** about serial vs. parallel architectures, lexicalism, DP vs. NP, antisymmetry, phases, cartography, and many other core aspects of grammar. Those new ideas and generalizations that have been widely accepted belong to the level of phenomena (D’Alessandro’s 2019 “mid-level generalizations”), not the explanatory level of innate natural kinds. And of course, **the existence of a large number of domain-specific innate elements in just one species is inherently unlikely, given the relative recency of our capacity for language (perhaps only 200,000 years old).**”

# Haspelmaths kritik

- Många inflytelserika lingvister har övergivit det generativa programmet.

Haspelmath: “Moreover, in the 21st century, the natural-kinds programme has basically been given up by some influential authors, as I will briefly note in §5.1.”

- Generativa artiklar består ofta av två delar, varav den andra bara är en formaliserad repetition av den första, beskrivande delen.

Haspelmath: “It is quite common for research articles to consist of two parts: One part lays out the phenomena in a way that is generally comprehensible to any linguist, and another part (typically called “analysis”) **describes the phenomena a second time, using the highly technical metalanguage of current mainstream generative grammar** (or more rarely, of some other generative approach, such as Distributed Morphology or Lexical Functional Grammar).”

# Adgers replik

Adger: “H2021 sets up the problem as follows:

1. [The general linguistics paradox] implies that the study of human language is based on the study of language universals. *nej, studier kan vara teoribaserade*
2. However, a number of recent studies, including Adger, Harbour, and Wexler (2009) make general claims on the study of particular languages and while this is in line with de Rivarol’s claims about the universality of French,” it is problematic. *nej, det är helt ok*
3. The confusion that has led to this state of affairs arises to a large extent because the notion of general linguistics has been replaced by the unclear one of theoretical linguistics. *nej, det är två olika saker*
4. An alternative to studying universals is to adopt an approach that H2021 calls a “Next-Generation Programme,” working with hypothetical innate building blocks. This is a “rich innate grammar blueprint.” *nej, det stämmer inte*
5. This is problematic for a number of reasons:
  1. it has been abandoned by major proponents;
  2. there is “no clear methodology for progressing” and
  3. there are “no clear criteria for success.”” *nej, nej och nej*

# Adgers replik

1. [The general linguistics paradox] implies that the study of human language in general must be based on the study of language universals.

Den mänskliga språkförmågan (FL/L) är en del av den verkliga världen, och alltså kan den utforskas med vetenskapliga metoder. Dessa metoder innebär att man formulerar teoretiska hypoteser och utvärderar dem med data och analyser.

Adger: “To determine whether one theory is better than another you need a means of evaluating them. To evaluate a theory empirically, you need to state an analysis. [...]

I take an analysis in linguistics to be a mapping between data and theory. Data will usually be “pre-processed” to a point where the analysis is viable. For example, in syntax we assume that phonetic-level variation in the pronunciation of ‘dog,’ produced on different occasions of utterance, is irrelevant, and that we can work with an abstract element.”

# Adgers replik

Adger: “This is how much work in theoretical linguistics proceeds. It draws conclusions about theories on the basis of empirical data, and sometimes those conclusions will have universal import. Its ultimate purpose is not to provide an analysis of the data, but rather to improve the theories. The aim is to achieve insight and understanding of FL/L through this method.”

Adger: “I think I have shown that it is false that “the study of human language in general *must* be based on the study of language universals” (my emphasis). It can also be based on the analysis of particular languages, and what those analyses tell us about theories of FL/L.”

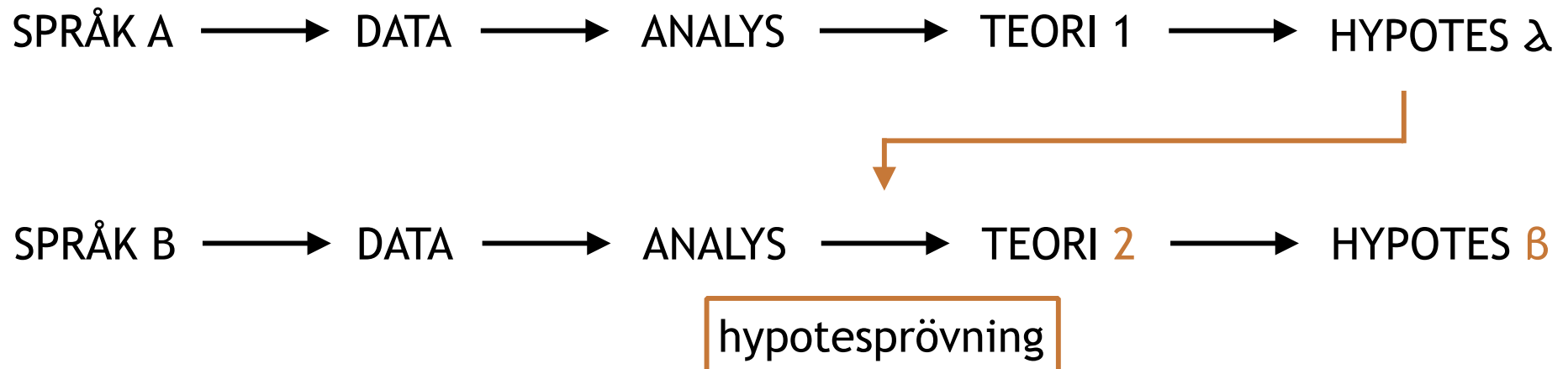
Teoretisk lingvistik har alltså två uppgifter:

- att formulera/utveckla språkvetenskapliga teorier (med stöd i data och analyser) om FL/L
- att jämföra olika språkvetenskapliga teorier med varandra, dels i relation till empiriska problem, dels med avseende på deskriptiv/explanativ elegans.

# Adgers replik

2. However, a number of recent studies, including Adger, Harbour, and Watkins (2009), base general claims on the study of particular languages and while this is “not as naive as Antoine de Rivarol’s claims about the universality of French,” it is problematic.

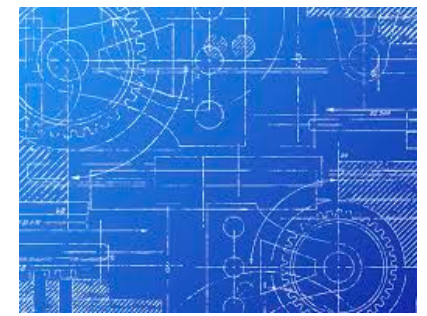
Nej, detta är inte problematiskt om man utgår från att varje språk kan ge ledtrådar som bidrar till förståelsen av FL/L.



# Adgers replik

3. The confusion that has led to this state of affairs arises to a large extent because the clear notion of general linguistics has been replaced by the unclear one of theoretical linguistics.

Adger: “The common term “Theoretical Linguistics” is used, I think, in just this way: the modifier *theoretical* isn’t to be distinguished from *applied* as H2021 suggests; it **signifies rather that the task that is being engaged in is development and investigation of theory using analyses of data** (and, less commonly, investigating the structure, consistency, and ramifications of the theories themselves, irrespective of their empirical consequences). Theoretical linguistics is not, then, just a term that has replaced General Linguistics, and I don’t think there is confusion in the field about this. **Theoretical linguistics is a particular approach to doing linguistics, roughly following the methodology laid out in the previous section.**”



# Adgers replik

4. An alternative to studying universals is to adopt an approach that H2021 calls a “Natural Kinds Programme,” working with hypothetical innate building blocks. This entails that there is a “rich innate grammar blueprint.”

Haspelmath menar dels att det måste finnas många olika typer av ”building blocks” i FL/L, dels att det är osannolikt att dessa har kunnat utvecklas under människans relativt korta evolution.

Haspelmath: “One of the motivations for this much less ambitious view of what is innate seems to be that a rich set of innate building blocks has come to be seen as implausible from the perspective of biological evolution (and thus the abandonment of a rich UG would help solve “Darwin’s Problem”; cf. Berwick & Chomsky 2016).”

Adger: “[...] where I think H2021 goes wrong is in its identification of the rich set of posits with the innate set of posits.”

# Adgers replik

”Building blocks” som *N*, *V*, *kategori* och *fras* är inte syntaktiska primitiver, utan sådana koncept kan abstraheras ytterligare. Arabiska siffror kan till exempel reduceras till kombinationer av 1 och 0. Ett annat exempel är kemi:

antal ämnen  
i världen:  $\infty$

antal grund-  
ämnen: 118

antal atomära  
byggstenar: 3

Adger: “In fact, the goal is to find the poorest set of “innate” categories (and it is not even necessary that these be domain specific—that is an empirical question, Adger and Svenonius 2015). H2021 also claims that “by eliminating ‘richness’ of UG, generative grammarians have also tended to reduce the explanatory scope of their analyses.” Again, this doesn’t follow, and for the same reasons. Richness is eliminated, but the information that the rich categories contained is not eliminated. It is reduced to a more minimal set of units and their structures. Indeed, this approach often profoundly extends the explanatory scope of the analyses.”

# Adgers replik

några  
inflytelserika  
lingvister

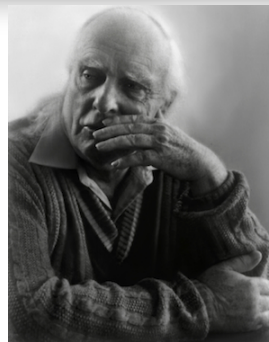


5. This is problematic for a number of reasons:

1. it has been abandoned by major proponents;
2. there is “no clear methodology for progressing” and
3. there are “no clear criteria for success.



Adger: “[...] when H2021 suggests that influential linguists have abandoned the “Natural Kinds Programme” that is a misreading of the situation. **They have not. Their work rather aims to reduce, as much as possible, the variety of theoretical posits.** The idea is that the relevant properties of the theory are minimized (like 1, 0 and interpreting position as numerical powers) so as to more accurately comport with the properties of the world that they refer to. **This work doesn’t reject the rich set of categories; it argues that the same or better explanations can be got by driving towards more abstract elements out of which these categories are built.**”



# Adgers replik

Att Haspelmath menar att det generativa programmet saknar metoder för framsteg och kriterier på framgång är något underligt, om man anser att målet är en bättre förståelse av FL/L.

Adger: “In section 2 I laid out a clear methodology for progress, which is what is standardly used in the kind of work I’ve been discussing here. I don’t claim that it is the only methodology for progress, and indeed my own research has used many other methods (including descriptive work, corpus work, experimental work etc.). **However, rejection of theories on the basis of evidence is clearly possible in such an approach, and that constitutes progress. Further, the method of abstraction just discussed can also lead to appreciable progress, both in terms of deepening understanding and in terms of empirical coverage.**

Finally, what of the claim that such an approach lacks clear criteria for success. I think this is of a piece with the issue about a methodology for progress. **Generally the criteria for success of a programme are whether it opens up new empirical phenomena for study and provides insight into the object of study. Both are clearly true.** ”

# En axiomatisk skillnad

Haspelmath tycks dels utgå från att grammatik ska utgå från språkspecifika beskrivningar, dels att det finns en mänsklig (inre) grammatik (FL/L). Detta kan vara motsägelsefullt.

Adger: “For Quine, linguistic theory in Chomsky’s sense (a theory of FL/L in our terms) is too distant from observed utterances. What is accessible to the linguist, according to Quine, is observations of utterances, and it is from these that grammars are born: **a grammar is, in the end, a theory of behaviour.** For Chomsky, **a grammar is a theory of an object of the natural world** (a cognitive state), and behaviour is simply evidence for or against that theory. Clearly I have taken the Chomskyan viewpoint here, but I think that **the mistake that H2021 makes is that it accepts the existence of the cognitive state FL/L, but at the same time it also takes a grammar to be ultimately a theory of behaviour.**”

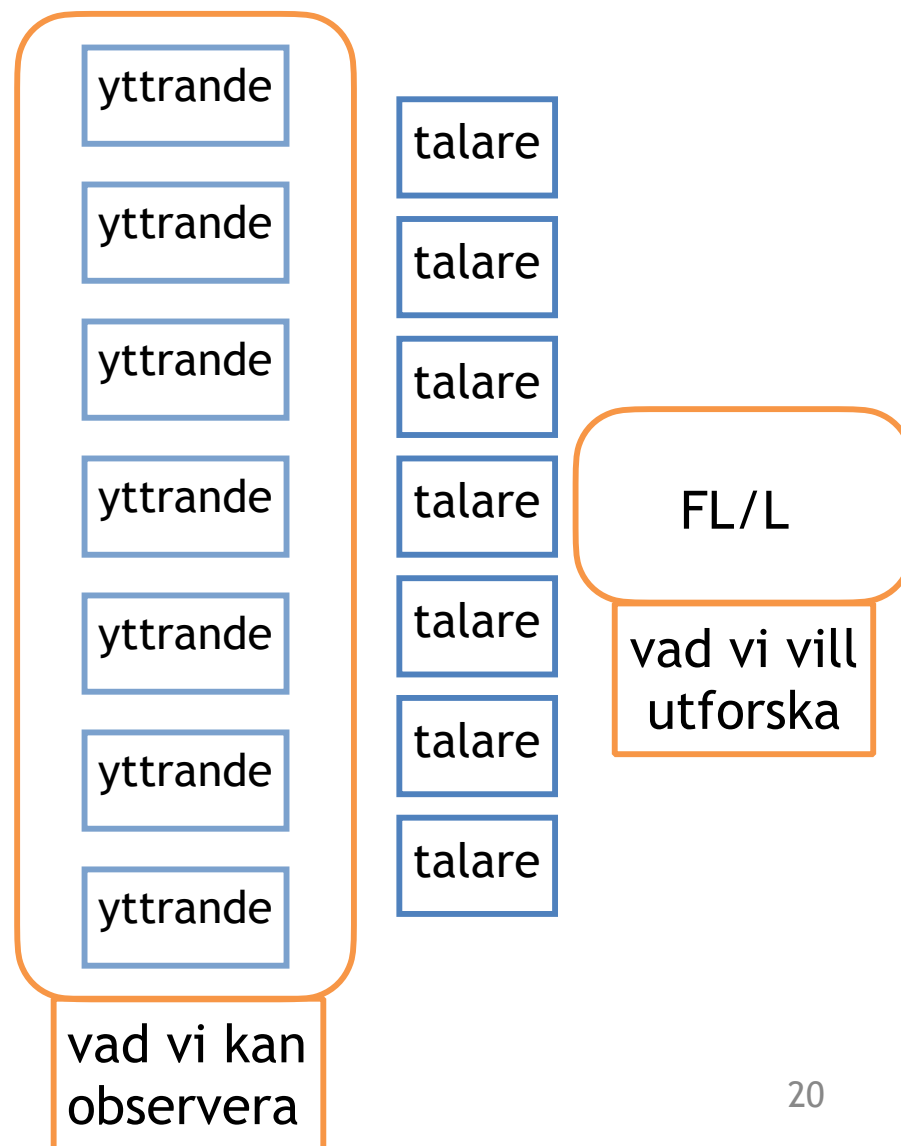
Mendívil-Giró: “Haspelmath assumes that GG and functional linguistics offer alternative or competing answers to the same questions, whereas the truth is that **these traditions raise different questions partly because they have different methodologies and, above all, different objects of study.**”

# En axiomatisk skillnad

Quine: en grammatik är en systematisk modell som bygger på summan av alla yttranden i ett visst språk. Den externa eller sociala grammatiken *beskriver* yttranden, och studeras bäst med samhällsvetenskapliga metoder.



Chomsky: en grammatik är en teoretisk modell som syftar till ökad förståelse av FL/L. FL/L producerar yttranden, via talare, och studeras bäst med naturvetenskapliga metoder.



# En axiomatisk skillnad

Platons  
grotta



*FL/L projicerar* den externa grammatiken via talare.

# Problem med alternativet - lingvistiska universalier

1. många beskrivningar av språk bygger på enstaka forskares (ganska begränsade, ibland äldre) insatser. SAG bygger på en stor forskningsinsats, och är ganska ny, men ändå inkomplett och långt ifrån motsvarande en sjuårings språkliga kompetens. Jämför med bakgrunden till aari (ett etiopiskt språk) i WALs: Hayward, Richard J. 1990. Notes on the Aari Language. In Hayward, Richard J. (ed.), *Omotiic Language Studies*, 425-493. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
2. de beskrivningar som finns är ofta inte kompatibla med varandra (se Haspelmath 2020 om universell terminologi), och tillåter alltså inte jämförelser.
3. att jämföra språk som till exempel tyska och meänkieli är som att jämföra äpplen och brödrostar: de är helt olika vad gäller status, beskrivning, standardisering, skrifthistoria och mycket annat.



# Problem med alternativet - lingvistiska universalier

5. det är absurt att anta att varje språk är unikt och kräver en unik analytisk verktygslåda - självfallet finns det större skillnader mellan obesläktade språk (isländska och baskiska) än mellan besläktade (isländska och älvdalska).
6. om varje språk enbart ska analyseras från sina egna förutsättningar kan man inte använda några generella termer/kategorier i beskrivningen.

Haspelmath: “The issue of cross-linguistic comparability was not widely discussed until Dryer (1997) and Croft (2001) pointed out that **language-particular categories are defined by language-particular criteria and thus cannot be compared directly**. Since Haspelmath (2010b), the idea of defining comparative terms carefully in such a way that they can be applied to all languages uniformly has been steadily gaining ground. If a category were innate and thus given a priori, it would be reasonable to think that it is identified by different criteria in different languages, but if not, **we need to provide definitions that focus on phonetic and semantic substance and make no reference to language-particular structures.**”

# Problem med alternativet - lingvistiska universalier

7. Studier av lingvistiska universalier kan aldrig ge negativ evidens, och tillåter alltså inte hypotesprövning av typen *om X förekommer i ett språk så bör Y saknas*.

D'Alessandro: "A theory makes predictions not only as to what will happen, but also, and especially, as to what will not. That is a key point in my kind of research which makes it radically different from many other token-based, corpus-based approaches."



Roberta D'Alessandro

Tack för mig!

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