Microtypology: Zooming in to get at the big picture

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Linguistic typology as a discipline has focused heavily on universally applicable contrasts from which generalizations about language(s) and language change can be derived. Based on this line of inquiry, a subfield has emerged that focuses on developing methods for 'balanced' sampling and deriving universally valid generalizations (see Backer 2010, Miestamo et al. 2016 for overviews, and Himmelmann 2000 for a critique).

In contrast, typological studies drawing on small samples - especially those with strong genealogical and/or areal biases - have traditionally been viewed as less relevant to general typological and theoretical questions (see also Kibrik 1998). Yet small-scale samples are well-suited for investigating explanations for typological distributions drawing on the complexity of grammatical systems, socio-cultural contexts, and links to historical events.

In this workshop, we invite an open discussion on what can be referred to as *microtypology*: zooming in to small-scale samples in order to achieve a **higher resolution** for asking 'how' and 'why' questions of typological distributions. Such small-scale samples involve languages that share many variables thanks to a common genealogical, areal, or socio-cultural core. This achieves higher explanatory power for variables that do differ, in line with the '**language laboratory'** idea (cf. Moulton 1962; De Vogelaer & Seiler 2012; Yang 2022). Moreover, microtypological research can effectively address phenomena that are confined to specific areas or families and do not easily fit within broad typological definitions (Arkadiev 2014; Konoshenko 2014; Shluinsky 2017).

Dense samples including many related varieties help counter-act the bias towards standard varieties in current typology (De Vogelaer & Seiler 2012). Microtypologists are, or closely collaborate with, **experts/primary fieldworkers** on the sample languages, allowing for **higher-quality data** collection and analysis, which ideally includes **spontaneous language use**. A **diachronic** thrust is typical as zooming in on nascent grammatical changes is crucial for examining the evolution of **typological diversity**. In-depth analyses facilitate the discovery of **grammatical interactions** (Heath 2016, 2018). Similarly picking up on Heath's (2016) call for more **integrative** efforts, microtypology offers opportunities for **interdisciplinary** approaches. Generally, the targeted variables in microtypology can be defined **bottom-up**, databases can better adhere to **late aggregation** and **modularity** principles, allowing for enhanced **reusability** and **sustainability**.

These properties of this type of approach can be loosely characterized by the family resemblance principle. Different studies exhibit different ones, and there may be no single study that exhibits all of them simultaneously.

1. Empirical depth

Microtypological research emphasizes high-quality data and offers a complementary "vertical" dimension to the "horizontal" dimension of macrotypology: to offer more depth where macrotypology offers more breadth (cf. König 2025).

Dense sampling: Samples are defined by *a priori* shared features among the varieties, such as genealogical, areal, or socio-cultural factors and aim at covering all varieties that meet the inclusion criteria. Such fine-grained samples extend beyond standard varieties (Murelli & Kortmann 2011), sometimes reaching the level of individual villages (Adamou & Sobolev 2024). The shared features also enable the discovery of meaningful correlations between variables (Noorlander et al. 2025). Such 'language laboratory' conditions (De Vogelaer & Seiler 2012) increase the explanatory power of qualitative and quantitative models.

Higher-quality data: Typically, data are specifically collected for the purpose of a particular study. Grammatical descriptions may serve as reference works rather than data sources. Ideally, the data include less elicitation and more naturalistic data (e.g., Haig et al. 2024). By focusing on authentic language use rather than abstracted systems, microtypology can capture inherent variation and usage patterns.

Close collaboration with language experts: The reliance on language experts/primary fieldworkers enhances data quality in terms of accuracy, integration with the broader language system, and contextualization with respect to language history and contact (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2010; Khachaturyan et al. 2025).

2. Integration

Microtypology can achieve integration between (i) diachrony and synchrony; (ii) target variables and their language-specific grammatical context; and (iii) linguistic and extralinguistic variables/interdisciplinary methodologies. By examining the configurations that condition and constrain grammatical changes we can study the evolution of typological diversity (cf. Bisang 2004, Evans 2016).

Diachrony: Synchronic typological distributions arise from diachronic processes (Greenberg 1978; Bybee 1988; Bickel 2007). Due to the complex interactions between linguistic and extralinguistic factors, the higher resolution that microtypology offers provides an effective strategy for working towards an explanatory framework (cf. Heath 2018).

Grammatical interactions: Linguistic phenomena are best studied in their grammatical context with particular attention to systemic interactions between them (Heath 2016, 2018). This is also a key insight of construction grammar approaches (Noël & Colleman 2021).

Interdisciplinary approaches: Including extralinguistic factors (Hildebrandt et al. 2023) and taking interdisciplinary approaches (e.g. with anthropology (Bickel & Gaenszle 2015); or sociolinguistics (Dobrushina 2025) can yield higher adequacy. Integrating insights and methodologies from dialectology and variationist sociolinguistics can advance this agenda (De Vogelaer & Seiler 2012).

3. Data collection and database design principles

The focus on developing fine grained, bottom-up variables and modular data sets makes it possible to explore a variety of research questions based on the same data set (e.g. Auderset & Konnerth 2025).

Actual forms: By incorporating actual forms and constructions instead of only relying on abstract features, the potential for data re-use increases (e.g., historical linguistics studies or integration of corpus measures such as frequencies).

Bottom-up variables: By developing variables in a bottom-up fashion, they are revised and expanded during data collection in order to capture variation instead of relying on pre-defined top-down categories that might miss important aspects of the phenomenon in question.

Late aggregation: Aggregation during data collection can be avoided more easily, allowing to instead focus on fine-grained variables that go beyond the specific phenomenon at hand (this follows AUTOTYP design principles, see Witzlack-Makarevich et al. 2022). The data can then be aggregated and summarized later on to answer specific questions. This contributes to a high re-use potential and sustainability of the data sets.

Modular database design: If different data sets are built independently implementing a common design and structure (cf. Witzlack-Makarevich et al. 2022), as facilitated through a microtypological approach, they can be expanded on and combined depending on the research question and thus work towards a systemic approach to language (e.g. combining data from corpora and grammars; looking at the prosody and constructional nature of a phenomenon, etc.).

With this workshop, we aim to bring together researchers working on different families, areas, or phenomena to discuss shared goals within this type of framework. Our rationale is that microtypological approaches can generate valuable insights for some of the most pertinent questions in typology.

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