Universality of Language

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Abstract: When highly abstracted, every language in the world has something in common, i.e. **universality**. I elaborate this argument, support it from the fact of language acquisition, and refute the main counterargument.
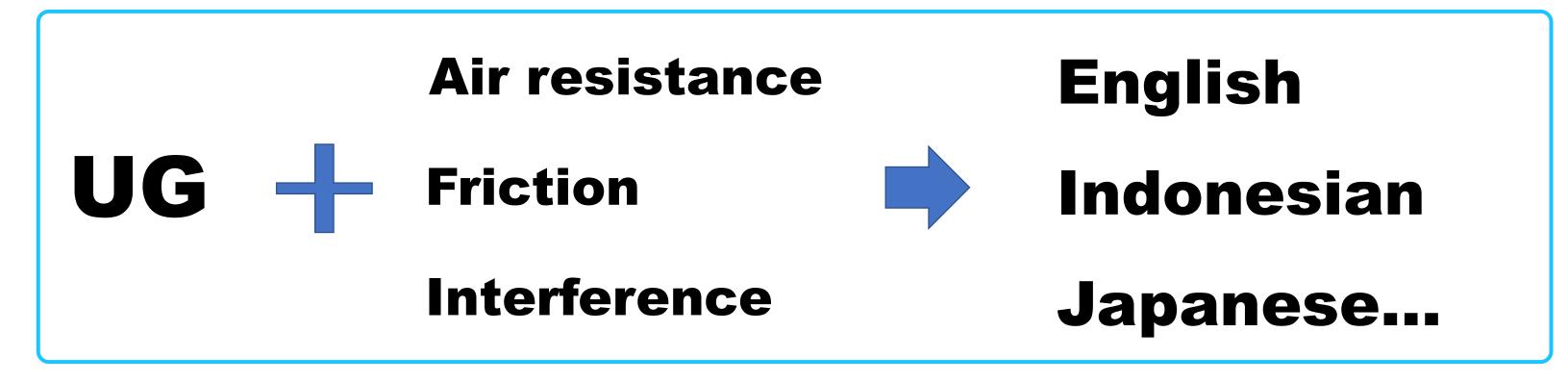
Introduction: Universality v.s. Accident

. Actually, finding a small degree of commonality among languages is not difficult. But most of such examples are just an accident. The English word *adorable* is translated as 可愛い in Japanese. These words are composed from similar meaning parts, namely *adore*/可 and *able*/愛. Though this is something in common among Japanese and English, this is just an accident – the property is far from universal.

ador-able

可(able) 愛(adore) い
ka　　wai　　i

Where to find universality: Ideal Space

The research field called **Generative Linguistics**, launched by a landmark study by Noam Chomsky (e.g. Chomsky, 1955/1975, 1995), has indicated that universality is found in a highly abstracted level. A useful analogy: Universality is found in **the ideal space** in physics – No air resistance, friction, or other interfering factors. The universality found in languages is called **Universal Grammar, UG**.

UG + Air resistance / Friction / Interference ➡ **English / Indonesian / Japanese…**

Variation in Order, Universality in Structure

Even when languages *look* different, we can find a universality on a more abstracted level. Japanese and English differ in their **word-order** – English has predicate-object order, but Japanese has object-predicate order. Looked at from a two-dimensional perspective, however, these languages can be said to have the same **structure**.

Children are born with UG (Guasti 2002)

With UG, language acquisition is…
- Completed in an amazingly **short time**
- Achieved **without explicit instruction**

➡ **This is because children know the fundamental knowledge of language (i.e. UG)**

If UG is absent…
- How do children achieve the amazing progress?
- Why are adults unable to make the same achievement?

Conclusion

In this study I have shown two things. Firstly, with an abstraction we can find a genuine universality among languages, called **UG**. Reality of **UG** is supported by the fact of language acquisition. It is thanks to the innate **UG** that children can acquire language in a short time, without explicit instruction.

References

Chomsky, N. (1955/1975). *The logical structure of linguistic theory*. New York: Plenum Press.
Chomsky, N. (1995). *The minimalist program*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
Guasti, M. T. (2002). *Language acquisition: The growth of grammar*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

in　　　Jpn
日本(Jpn)　で(in)
nihon　　　de

love　　movies
映画が(movies)　好き (love)
eiga-ga　　　　suki