

ACCOUNTING FOR RARE TYPOLOGICAL FEATURES IN FORMAL SYNTAX:
THREE STRATEGIES AND SOME GENERAL REMARKS

The purpose of this paper is to explore the treatment of *rara* and *rarissima* in formal syntax, in its mainstream Principles-and-Parameters (P-and-P) version. I present the three principal strategies for handling them, which I illustrate with case studies, followed by critical remarks. *Rara* present a particular challenge for P-and-P, given the central idea of this approach that seeming complexity and idiosyncrasy are purely epiphenomenal. The three strategies that have been employed to handle *rara* are the following:

- (1) **Reductionist.** The rare feature is derivable from the interaction of independently motivated UG parameter settings. Consider ‘V2 languages’, namely those in which the finite verb must occupy second position in the main clause. They seem confined primarily to Germanic languages and those in close contact with them. One popular account of V2, initiated by den Besten 1983, derives it from the movement of the inflected verb into C and the movement of the initial XP into CP. Each operation is quite common crosslinguistically.
- (2) **UG stipulation.** The theory is structured so that the rare feature is predicted to be rare. Consider Chinese, which has the unusual feature of being basically SVO, but with the order relative-noun. Travis 1989 develops a theory of markedness relations within UG in which Chinese manifests the most marked, and hence rarest, combinations of these two properties.
- (3) **Language-particular stipulation.** Rare features are outside the domain of UG principles and parameters per se and are attributed to language-particular rules. Consider the very rare order OVS, manifested by Hixkaryana. Kayne 1994 and Baker 2001 argue that OVS languages are parametrically SOV, but have a movement rule fronting the VP, yielding OVS. They suggest that the more extra rules that need to be stipulated, the rarer the feature.

In my view, (2) is a priori the least desirable of the three strategies, in that it complicates the theory of UG without at the same time providing new insight about grammar. (1) and (3) each have their plusses and minuses. (1) has the advantage of being most in accord with the spirit of P-and-P, but with the seeming defect of failing to account for the rarity of the feature. Why, for example, should the conjunction of two common processes yield a rare feature? (3) is a move away from a ‘pure’ P-and-P theory toward a construction-based approach. Yet the idea that grammars ‘pay’ for rare features by needing extra rules is intuitively appealing.

I argue that of the three strategies, (1) should be appealed to whenever possible, precisely because of its reductionist nature. This strategy fails to explain *why* the feature is rare, but that is not a bad thing. As is argued in Newmeyer 2005, most typological generalizations fall out from a theory of performance, rather from a theory of UG (see also Hawkins 2004). Strategy (3) will be necessary for the residue of features not capturable by (1). The extent to which stipulated rules reflect typological rarity remains to be investigated.