

Ergativity and depth of analysis

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In this talk, I will argue that “depth of analysis” does not deserve the prestige that it is sometimes given in general linguistics. While language description should certainly be as detailed as possible, general linguistics must rely on worldwide comparison of languages, and this cannot be based on language-particular analyses. Rigorous quantitative comparison requires uniform measurement, and this implies abstracting away from many language-particular peculiarities. I will illustrate this on the basis of ergative patterns, starting out from I.A. Mel’čuk’s (1981) proposal for Lezgian. This proposal was not successful, but why not? And why is Baker’s (2015) theory of dependent case likewise unsuccessful? By contrast, quantitative worldwide research has found striking similarities of ergative coding patterns, which can be explained by the efficiency theory of asymmetric coding. I will argue that this success is due to a more cautious approach to understanding Human Language, which does not rely on the Mendeleyevian vision for grammar (that all grammars are made from the same innate building blocks).