

Language Diversity: friend or foe?

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Languages are different. This obvious (and somewhat trivial) observation was supplemented in 20th century linguistics with the dogma of equality: beneath this obvious diversity, it was argued, all languages are in some way “the same thing”. This dogma has had a tremendously positive impact on the study of the worldwide linguistic diversity, resulting in the current enormous (and growing) knowledge about the world’s languages.

This wealth of data has at least two important consequences. To start, it allows us to empirically investigate to which extent all languages are indeed ‘the same thing’, i.e. what is universal among the world’s languages. However, at the same time the growing knowledge about the actual diversity is showing that many ideas about the underlying ‘sameness’ are not borne out: languages are different after all.