

LANGTIME CHAT, EPISODE 46

HOW TO READ LIKE A LINGUISTICS PROFESSOR

LANGUAGE

WARNING

ACADEMIC-ESE

As a word of caution, academics are notoriously bad at writing when you think of the written word as something to be shared with the general public. Many academic writers are so laser-focused on sharing their work with a specific, very small group of like-minded researches that people outside the small population will find it difficult, if not impossible, to understand.

Academic writing is often not intended for a general audience.

ACADEMIC-ESE

Even when academics *think* they're writing for a general audience, they usually aren't.

READING LEVELS

Written texts intended to be shared to the general public are often written at a 4th-to-8th grade reading level.

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And that's a good thing.

READING LEVELS

Those are the years when you're gaining a significant amount of general knowledge to form a foundation for much more specific studies.

READING LEVELS

Anything written above that level starts to become more focused and written with a more specific intended audience.

Try helping a high schooler with their homework to see what I mean.

READING LEVELS

The vocabulary becomes more specialized. The structures become more dense and weighty.

The constructions become more unwieldy (to the point where some wordings are historically rooted and make no sense to anyone but people who read the same thing day in and day out).

BASIC EXPECTATIONS

STRUCTURE

Many linguistics articles follow the same basic structures, depending on the basic type of work involved.

STRUCTURE

“Arts-y” articles: Qualitative approaches

STRUCTURE

“Science-y” articles: More quantitative approaches or methodological approaches

ABSTRACTIONS

ABSTRACTS

These babies are misnomers. A well-written abstract should make the work that follows more tangible and approachable.

ABSTRACTS

Good abstracts can help you learn two key pieces of information:

- (1) a bite-sized summary of the article, which can help you decide if the article is worth the effort/energy of reading it more thoroughly
- (2) the author's (or authors') writing style, which can help you decide if the article is worth the effort/energy of reading it more thoroughly

ABSTRACTS

Not all abstracts can teach you those things. Some authors struggle specifically with writing abstracts, and some authors don't write their own abstracts (or some publications don't have authors write their own abstracts), which means you're reading someone else's take.

ABSTRACTS

Sometimes there isn't an abstract at all. In that case, look for a list of keywords, if there is one.

If not, move on to the next stage.

SKIM LIKE A PRO

SKIM, SKIM, SKIM

Don't just jump in. If the abstract interested you, start by skimming the introduction and the conclusion.

SKIM, SKIM, SKIM

If you're still interested, then look in the body of the paper, specifically focusing on things like tables, charts, and data sets. You may be surprised how much you can learn from those features alone.

SKIM, SKIM, SKIM

As you're looking at those features, skim the text around them to get a better taste for how the author approaches and analyzes them.

SKIM, SKIM, SKIM

A good practice for authors to follow is to sandwich the feature with their own words:

(a) introduce what readers are about to see

(b) provide the data/chart/figure/image

(c) discuss/analyze what was provided (show the readers how it fits in or why it's important)

SKIM, SKIM, SKIM

If they don't do all three steps like that, then they assume readers will understand the importance and analysis of the data/information on their own. That means the author is writing for a very specific audience.

**YOUR TIME IS A
RESOURCE**

INVEST WISELY

Still interested in the work? Then it's time to invest more energy.

Here is where you go back and dig into the text, starting with the introduction.

INVEST WISELY

As you read more carefully, take notes, highlight, underline, or otherwise annotate in a way that works for you. Having previously skimmed the document, your highlighting and note-taking can take more meaning so you don't end up with an entire page of yellow highlights staring back at you.

INVEST WISELY

Remember that your time is valuable. If the article becomes less helpful as you dig into its meat, re-evaluate it in terms of what you had hoped to get out of it in the first place. If it isn't meeting your needs, feel no shame in moving on.

INVEST WISELY

Remember that your time is valuable. If the article becomes less helpful as you dig into its meat, re-evaluate it in terms of what you had hoped to get out of it in the first place. If it isn't meeting your needs, feel no shame in moving on.

Even if other people think that article is the bee's knees or one of the best in the field.

**READING
EXEMPLIFIED**

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Research Article

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Indexing and flagging, and head and dependent marking

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ABSTRACT

Abstract

This paper compares the concept pair *indexing/flagging* with the well-known concept pair *head/dependent marking* that is widely used in typology. It shows that a general concept of flagging (comprising case and adpositional marking) is needed, and it sketches the advantages of the indexing concept over the older idea of “person agreement”. It then points out that the notions of head and dependent are hard to define (apart from the two basic domains of clauses and nominals), and that the head/dependent marking typology does not take the function of syntactic relation markers into account. On a functional view, both flags and indexes can be seen as role-identifiers, as opposed to concordants (attributive agreement markers). After discussing three further issues with the head/dependent marking typology, involving construct markers, concordants, and cross-indexes, I conclude that the concept pair *indexing/flagging* is more suitable for typological purposes than *head/dependent marking*.

Keywords

argument indexing, flagging, head marking, dependent marking, case marking, adpositions, language typology

From the abstract alone, you can see that the article makes some basic assumptions about knowledge shared between author and reader.

Let's look at some key words and phrases that are considered "common knowledge" for this article.

Abstract

This paper compares the concept pair *indexing/flagging* with the well-known concept pair *head/dependent marking* that is widely used in typology. It shows that a general concept of flagging (comprising case and adpositional marking) is needed, and it sketches the advantages of the indexing concept over the older idea of “person agreement”. It then points out that the notions of head and dependent are hard to define (apart from the two basic domains of clauses and nominals), and that the head/dependent marking typology does not take the function of syntactic relation markers into account. On a functional view, both flags and indexes can be seen as role-identifiers, as opposed to concordants (attributive agreement markers). After discussing three further issues with the head/dependent marking typology, involving construct markers, concordants, and cross-indexes, I conclude that the concept pair *indexing/flagging* is more suitable for typological purposes than *head/dependent marking*.

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argument indexing, flagging, head marking, dependent marking, case marking, adpositions, language typology

indexing

flagging

head (marking)

dependent (marking)

typology

case

adposition

person agreement

attributive agreement

construct markers

concordants

cross-indexes

Abstract

This paper compares the concept pair *indexing/flagging* with the well-known concept pair *head/dependent marking* that is widely used in typology. It shows that a general concept of flagging (comprising case and adpositional marking) is needed, and it sketches the advantages of the indexing concept over the older idea of “person agreement”. It then points out that the notions of head and dependent are hard to define (apart from the two basic domains of clauses and nominals), and that the head/dependent marking typology does not take the function of syntactic relation markers into account. On a functional view, both flags and indexes can be seen as role-identifiers, as opposed to concordants (attributive agreement markers). After discussing three further issues with the head/dependent marking typology, involving construct markers, concordants, and cross-indexes, I conclude that the concept pair *indexing/flagging* is more suitable for typological purposes than *head/dependent marking*.

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**“the well-known
concept pair *head/
depending marking*”**

You don't need to be familiar with *all* the terms on that list to approach the article. But, chances are, if the majority of them just sound like gobbledygook from an ivory tower to you, then this article will be very difficult for you to read without doing support research (i.e. looking up all the concepts/terms you aren't familiar with so you can understand what is being said about them).

INTRODUCTION

1 Comparative concepts for cross-linguistic grammatical comparison

Over the last few decades, we have come to understand the extent of the grammatical differences between languages much better, due in large measure to our ability to compare language structures through comparative concepts. We have been able to identify a substantial number of grammatical universals in the wake of Greenberg (1963), and the increasingly shared vocabulary for highly similar grammatical phenomena in languages from around the world makes it more and more useful for researchers working on different continents to communicate with each other and to compare the patterns of their languages.

But quite a few conceptual unclaritys remain, and this paper addresses one core area of grammar where I think that more work on terminological and conceptual clarification is useful: argument marking via PERSON INDEXES and via FLAGS (case-markers and adpositions), as well as the well-known terms *head marking* and *dependent marking*. My ultimate interest is in identifying potential universals and how they might be explained, though better comparisons are also likely to lead to better descriptions of individual languages, often by adopting terms that are well-known from research on universals and cross-linguistic patterns. Since the concepts of head marking and dependent marking were originally proposed by Nichols (1986; 1992) in the context of claims about universal tendencies, and these concepts have become widely known, I think that they deserve careful critical examination.¹

But in a sense, the main purpose of this paper is to introduce and discuss the relatively new terms *index* and *flag*. Apart from *head marking* and *dependent marking*, the literature also often uses the term pair *agreement* and *case* in a very similar sense (e.g. Siewierska & Bakker, 2009; Baker, 2013), so I will also explain how flagging and indexing relate to these terms.

The main argumentative thrust of the paper is the contention that the concepts (and terms) *indexing* and *flagging* are better suited for typological comparison than Nichols's head/dependent marking, for a variety of reasons. But I do not want to say that head and dependent marking are entirely useless. If defined clearly, this term pair may well continue to play an important role. In general, there are many different comparative concepts that can be useful, and once they are all defined clearly, they can coexist happily and be used side by side.

The current paper will say more about flagging than about indexing because indexing has been dealt with in some detail in an earlier paper (Haspelmath, 2013).

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- **comparative approach to describing language features**
- **theoretical differences in terminology and how it is used to describe cross-linguistic patterns**
- **shift in vocabulary to accommodate new data and methods (absolutely no effect on the languages themselves)**

CONCLUSION

11 Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the relation between the comparative concept pair *head/dependent marking* (Nichols, 1986; 1992) and the closely related concept pair *indexing/flagging*. I have given clear definitions of the latter and pointed out some difficulties with the former. In particular, the abstract notion of “head” is not well-defined, and there does not seem to be a good reason to base one’s typology on the place of the marker, rather than on the function, as argued by Lehmann (1983; 1985) and Croft (1988; 2001). By contrast, flags and indexes can be readily characterized as role-identifiers (pure role-markers on nominals, and role-markers combined with person markers, respectively), as opposed to concordants (adnominal “agreement” markers), which only serve to indicate relatedness and have no role-identifying function (section 7).

The idea that a language may holistically be characterized as “head marking” or “dependent marking” is by now fairly widespread, but in fact, given the rarity of construct markers (section 8) and the low profile of gender/number concordants (section 9) in the relevant discussions, it seems that such holistic characterizations can usually be replaced by “indexing-prominent” and “flagging-prominent”, respectively.

As I noted at the beginning, my primary interest is in identifying grammatical universals. In this paper, I have not really made progress toward this goal, though I already noted in Haspelmath (2013) that the notion of indexing is a crucial ingredient to a number of universals. I would expect that due to the greater clarity of the concepts of indexing and flagging, it will be easier to state and test universals based on these notions than to state and test universals based on head/dependent marking. I would be proven wrong if it were shown, for example, that dependent-marking in attributive adjectives (as in *kalt-es Wasser* ‘cold water’) correlates significantly with dependent-marking of other types. And I would be wrong if it could be shown that some universal generalizations make crucial reference to the distinction between adpositions and case-markers (however it is drawn). But this is a topic for future research.

- **formalizing how to discuss features of languages**
- **move toward discussing features in general patterns of behaviors rather than as set features**
- **nothing new is presented –it's all about how we talk about language**

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BODY

Indexing of arguments is just as common in the world's languages. In particular, we find indexing of S- and A-arguments of verbs (cf. 3a-b), but also indexing of P-arguments (4a-c).

- (3) a. Mauwake (Trans-New Guinea)
umi-nen 'I will die'
umi-nan 'you will die'
umi-non 's/he will die' (Berghäll, 2015, p. 150)
- b. Pite Saami (Uralic)
buold-av 'I burn'
buold-a 'you burn'
bualld-a 's/he burns' (Wilburm 2014, p. 162)
- (4) a. French
je te vois 'I see you'
je le vois 'I see him'
je les vois 'I see them'
- b. Kham (Tibeto-Burman)
səres-na-ke-o 'he recognized me (-na)'
səres-ni-ke-o 'he recognized you (-ni)'
ya-səres-ke-o 'he recognized them (ya-)' (Watters, 2002, p. 79)
- c. Manam (Oceanic) (Lichtenberk, 1983, pp. 124-125)
di-te-a
 3PL.SBJ.RL-see-1SG.OBJ 'they saw me'
- i-te-ʔamin*
 3SG.SBJ.RL-see-2PL.OBJ 'he saw you (PL)'
- i-ʔint-a*
 3SG.SBJ.RL-pinch-1SG.OBJ 'he pinched me'
- u-ʔint-i*
 1SG.SBJ.RL-pinch-3SG.OBJ 'I pinched him'

- **a LOT of examples (which I love!)**
- **examples from a variety of languages (I also love!)**
- **not a lot of overt discussion—it is on the reader to figure out the connections/importance**

REASSESS READING

GOALS

I want to read this article to better understand how Grambank uses “index” and “flag” as language features.

My goal in reading align with Haspelmath’s goal in writing it, so it’s worth it to me to invest time and energy in the article.

I found this article very helpful in understanding the terms “index” and “flag.”

But I have also been reading and studying areas touched on in the article for two decades. Even with that background, there were times I had to re-read areas and really stop and sit with the examples to figure out what was going on.

The article is presented breezily but is anything but an easy read.

**EXPANDING FOR
LARGER TEXTS**

BOOKS

Longer texts like books are structured differently but often still follow the basic premises presented here.

BOOKS

Start with the blurb, often provided on the back of the book.

Then focus on the table of contents.

If there's a preface or short introduction, skim that.

BOOKS

Remember this isn't fiction, and there should not be any twists or spoilers.

Thumb through those pages and read paragraphs here and there to decide how you might use this book as a resource.

BOOKS

You often don't need to read the entire text from beginning to end to find it useful.

In fact, some of the most useful books I return to time and time again are ones I have never (and will never) read from cover to cover.