

Against trivializing language description (and comparison)

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Abstract¹

This paper argues that recent proposals to sharply distinguish between language description and comparison are ill-conceived for two reasons. First, comparison is unavoidable and hence an integral part of description. Second, the proposals for a strict separation are based on an unrealistic and anachronistic conception of descriptive categories, assuming that these can be defined in purely distributional terms. Here it is shown that description and comparison make use of, and struggle with, the same kind of empirical evidence; namely, crosslinguistically identifiable properties of grammatical formatives and constructions. If descriptive categories and crosslinguistic comparative concepts did not share such properties, language comparison would be devoid of empirical content. Hence claims that they are ontologically different do not stand up to further scrutiny. In short, said recent proposals portray language description and comparison in too-simplistic terms. They ignore, or at least downplay, most of the complexities involved in both descriptive and comparative projects, many of which in fact result from the inseparability of description and comparison.

1. Introduction

In the recent debate on methodological and conceptual issues in crosslinguistic comparison (cp. the discussion section *On categories: language particular – comparative – universal* in *Linguistic Typology* 20.2, 2016), there are many statements to the effect that linguistic structures and categories are language-specific and therefore incommensurable. Language description is presented as a straightforward, self-contained enterprise that can be neatly separated from crosslinguistic comparison. Thus, for example, Lazard advises that “[d]escription should be carefully kept apart from comparison” (Lazard 2002:147). Furthermore, he asserts that “[t]ypology [...] entails two successive stages: description and comparison. These two stages require different methodologies” (Lazard 2002:145).

In this contribution, I will argue the opposite view; namely, that description and comparison should not and indeed cannot be kept apart in the sense that they make use of essentially the same conceptual apparatus and overlap substantially in their actual practices. In particular, they do not make use of ontologically different types of concepts. This is not to deny that description and comparison have different goals and thus, at some point, diverge to go their separate ways. But a significant part of the journey is spent in tandem.

There are two main arguments for the inseparability of language description and comparison. First, description is inextricably intertwined with comparison. In the course of describing a language it is crucial to make use of properties of linguistic units and structures that can be identified across

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languages (e.g. ordering relations). This will be briefly illustrated with an example from noun-phrase structure in the Austronesian language *Wooi* in section 2.

Second, the central argument for separating language description from language comparison given by Lazard (2002) and, following him, Haspelmath (2010 *passim*), pertains to the claim that language description is essentially about identifying language-specific distributional classes which are deemed to be incommensurable *per se*. This view, in turn, presupposes that language-specific distributions can be determined on their own, without theoretical and substantive controls. As briefly summarized in section 3, ‘pure’ distributionalism is impossible, because the identification of distributional classes is guided and constrained by substantive (semantic or phonetic) as well as theoretical considerations. Consequently, the resulting distributions become at least partially comparable across languages inasmuch as similar constraints have been applied in establishing them. In fact, section 3 provides an argument for the view that there is no principled reason for not including distributional facts in crosslinguistic comparison.

Both arguments make use of the fact that language-specific categories and crosslinguistic comparative concepts involve the same kind of formal and semantic properties that can be easily and uncontroversially identified across different languages. Examples for such properties include ordering relations (X occurs before Y), the ability to occur in a particular usage context (e.g. to express a future event) or the involvement of a particular tongue position. Typologists largely agree in their use of these properties for language comparison. Disagreements arise when it comes to the question of how to identify and explain crosslinguistically recurrent clusters of them. While some issues in this regard are in need of further investigation and debate, the claim that language-specific categories and crosslinguistically recurrent clusters are ontologically different is misconceived, as further discussed in section 4.

The basic view of language description and comparison presented here is also found in much other recent work that is critical of claims regarding the need to strictly distinguish between the two. This includes, for example, Auwera & Sahoo (2015), Beck (2016), Dahl (2016), Lander & Arkadiev (2016), Lehmann (2018), Moravcsik (2016), and Round & Corbett (2019). However, the main focus in all of these contributions is on the relationship between language-specific categories and concepts for crosslinguistic comparison. Here, on the other hand, the main focus is on how the key proponents of a sharp separation between language description and language comparison, Lazard and Haspelmath, conceive of language-particular categories, arguing that their view of these is ill-conceived and that, therefore, their views on the separability of language description and comparison are not tenable.

Haspelmath (2018) provides brief responses to some of the core arguments against his views put forward in the publications just mentioned. It is a secondary concern of the present contribution to show that these responses do not settle the matter, but rather add to an already long list of conceptual problems. It may be of note, however, that Haspelmath’s major reaction to the criticisms launched against his approach consists in a substantial extension and further subclassification of what he calls *comparatives concepts*.

In his first major contribution to the topic (Haspelmath 2010), Haspelmath defines comparative concepts as “concepts specifically designed for the purpose of comparison that are independent of descriptive categories” (2010:664). The examples he provides are almost all well-known grammatical categories such as *adjective*, *relative clause*, *ergative case*, *future tense*, and so on. In Haspelmath (2018:85), he makes a further distinction between “*category-like* comparative concepts and *etic* comparative concepts”. The former are *adjective*, *relative clause*, etc., while the latter include “kinds of pronunciations in phonetic typology” (2018:87)², nodes on semantic maps (2018:87), visual stimuli (2018:88), and “translation contexts, as employed by questionnaire-based studies [...] and in parallel text typology” (2018:88).

The etic comparative concepts significantly overlap with the crosslinguistically applicable grammatical properties mentioned above and further discussed in sections 2 and 3. Obviously, one cannot simply say that “a visual stimulus” is a “crosslinguistic property”, but the fact that a particular construction occurs as a regular response to a visual stimulus may constitute a (weak) crosslinguistically shared property. So, in this regard, there is no disagreement between Haspelmath’s approach and the approach defended here. The disagreement exclusively pertains to how Haspelmath conceives of language-specific categories and of “category-like comparative concepts”.

Finally, the argument developed in this paper does not, of course, aspire to address all the issues that are relevant to the debate. As will be briefly mentioned in section 4, there is much more to be said about Haspelmath’s very problematic ontological and epistemological claims (see Spike 2019 for some important critical points). There is also the fundamental issue of where, in the vast sea of variation in the communicative practices observable in many parts of the world, to draw the boundary between variants shared by speakers of *the same* language, who then presumably also share the same descriptive categories, and variants belonging to different languages, a point particularly clearly articulated in Gil (2016).

2. On the inevitability of comparison

It is difficult to overemphasize the human propensity for making comparisons. As social psychology tells us, humans constantly make comparisons: between themselves and others, between one way of cutting the pie and another, between this dog and that dog, and so on. One reason to do so, and the reason most important in the current context, is that comparison allows for efficiently processing the information needed to make judgments and decisions. As Corcoran et al. put it:

comparisons in general are so ubiquitous because they allow us to process information in a more efficient manner than more absolute modes of information processing. This may be the case, because comparisons in general, [...], **limit the range of information that has to be considered to evaluate or judge a given object.** (Corcoran et al. 2011:122, emphasis added NPH; see Mussweiler & Epstude 2009 for the full argument and pertinent experimentation)

When describing a language, this means comparing all phenomena under investigation with what one knows about similar phenomena in other languages one is familiar with, as well as with the definitions and descriptions of the phenomena at hand found in the general and typological literature. The

² It is not clear to me what this refers to.

comparisons involved here are often exemplar-based, i.e. a comparison is made with specific formatives and constructions in other languages. When one suspects a given formative to be a first person singular pronoun, it is then compared to other exemplars of first person singular pronouns that one already knows. Direct comparison immediately brings to the fore issues such as: Are the positional possibilities of the formative in question shared with a larger class of referential expressions or do they have their own regularities (are they more clitic-like)? Are there different forms – short and long? Different forms according to syntactic function? And so on.

Handbooks and crosslinguistic surveys become important once one recognizes the need to explore more systematically the phenomenon under investigation (typically because the exemplars for comparison with which one is familiar do not provide enough pointers to what the relevant parameters for a comprehensive description might be). They are also obviously relevant when one encounters a phenomenon for the first time. In this case, the next step would be to search the literature on the domain to which one suspects the phenomenon belongs (e.g. something to do with possession, with clause linking, with modality, etc.) for pointers to similar phenomena, and for the parameters typically used to analyze them.

To illustrate this, we turn to an example from *Wooi*, a language belonging to the South Halmahera West New Guinea (SHWNG) branch of the Austronesian family, spoken on Yapen island in the Indonesian part of New Guinea. In this language, there is a clustering of grammatical formatives at the right edge of NPs, which all seem to have some kind of determiner-like function and pose various problems for descriptive analysis. Here I will only illustrate one such problem from ongoing work on the language. The formula in (1) provides a rough outline of the overall structure of the *Wooi* NP.³

(1) POSS HEAD ADJ NUM/QUANT REL.CLAUSE **DET PRO/NUM**

In (1), **DET(erminer)** is a place-holder for a number of slots in which more than a dozen different formatives may occur. These will not be further discussed here for reasons of space, but most examples will contain one or two of these formatives. Our concern here is exclusively with the NP-final slot where only pronouns or numerals may occur. An example for a pronoun in this position is given in (2).

(2) *Markus riora Jon hnia.*
 Markus r-i-ora Jon hnia
 PN -3S-hit PN 3P

‘Markus hit John and associates.’ (Sawaki 2016:120)

Based on examples such as (2), it may appear that the pronoun here functions as a marker of an associative plural construction, and this is how it has been analyzed for *Wooi* (Sawaki 2016:118–121) and the neighboring language *Ambai* (Karubaba 2008). However, the following examples raise doubts as to whether this analysis is sufficient. In (3), the pronoun following a proper noun is singular and the overall construction refers to just one referent.

³ Abbreviations for grammatical categories: 1: first person singular; 2: second person; 3: third person; ADJ: adjective; AN: animate; CLF: classifier; D: dual; DET: determiner; DIR: directional particle; FILL: filler (hesitation particle); FUT: future; HPRX: hearer-proximal (demonstrative); LOC: locative; M: masculine; NUM: numeral; P: plural; PFV: perfective; PN: personal name; POSS: possessive/possessor; PRO: pronoun; QUANT: quantifier; REL: relative clause marker; S: singular; SBJ: subject; SPRX: speaker-proximal (demonstrative); VEN: venitive (directional particle).

- (3) *Hetong buku ne ve Agus aw.*
 3P:give book SPRX for PN 2S

‘They gave these books to you Agus.’ (Sawaki 2016:120)

In (4), it is not a lexical noun that is in construction with the pronoun, but rather a headless relative clause.

- (4) *ve ra to Wovay ne haru humbo ma o:*
 REL go DIR PLACE.NAME SPRX 3D 3D:row VEN FILL

‘the two who went to Wovay rowed here’ [gunung_AYA 061]⁴

Finally, most of the examples with plural pronouns in spontaneous texts are additive rather than associative plurals, i.e. they refer to a homogeneous set of referents (cp. Daniel & Moravcsik 2013), as in (5).

- (5) *aynyang pa hnia hengkavio*
 old.person HPRX 3P 3P:say

‘the old people said ...’ [botanic_PIMAMU 047f]

Given these uses, it is clear that associative plural is but one of a number of functions of Wooi NP-final pronouns. Having noticed this, one typically starts searching for similar constructions in other languages in order to arrive at a more systematic account of it. The search is guided by both formal and semantic considerations. The constructions of interest should involve pronominals at the edge of NPs (right or left, as the position of adnominal modifiers and grammatical markers is known to vary across languages). They should involve singular as well as plural pronouns and, in the case of plural pronouns, allow for additive as well as associative plural readings.

In our example case, the search will lead inter alia to examples for and literature on pronominal articles (Himmelman 1997:215–219, 2001:838f), also known as *pronominal determiners* (Lyons 1999:141). Comparing descriptions of these articles with the formal and semantic properties of the NP-final pronouns in Wooi allows one to efficiently identify properties relevant to the comprehensive description of the Wooi construction. Initially, of course, this is just a working hypothesis. It may very well turn out that no useful comparisons can be made, because there is not enough overlap between the constructions. Given the formal and semantic search criteria, however, this is not very likely, but still a possibility to be reckoned with.

Particularly useful are, on the one hand, comparisons with clear and well-established examples of the phenomenon in question. In the case of pronominal articles, the Khoe-Kwadi language Nama provides one such example. In Nama, almost every nominal expression is bounded by a pronominal clitic at the right edge, as seen in (6).⁵

- (6) *ti=ta ke k!aro-η!hu=p η!â nî k/?an-mâ*
 1S=1S SBJ desert-land=3S.M LOC FUT.PFV smoke-stay

‘I will pitch in the desert.’ (Heinz Roberg, p.c.)

⁴ This and most of the following examples are from the DoBeS-CELD Wooi corpus (Kirihio et al. 2009–2015) and can be cross-checked there. Examples from spontaneous discourse are referenced for name of the session and line number.

⁵ The Nama examples are from fieldwork by Heinz Roberg using his orthography and glossing; see also Himmelman (1997: 216, 2001:839). Hagman (1977) provides a fuller account.

This example also shows that the free pronoun forms themselves are built with the same formatives, which in this case cliticize to a pronominal stem (*ti=ta* in (6)). As a consequence, almost all nominal and pronominal expressions end with a pronominal clitic, the exceptions being compounds (e.g. *k!aro* ‘desert’ in (6)), incorporated nouns (*k/?an* ‘smoke’ in (6)), and predicative uses such as *kao-?ao* ‘chief’ in (7).

- (7) *sa=th ke nî kao-?ao*
 2=2S.M SBJ FUT.PFV lead-man
 ‘You will become chief.’ (Heinz Roberg, p.c.)

Important formal and semantic properties for the description of the Wooi NP that emerge from this comparison include the fact that both nouns and pronominal stems occur with the pronominal articles; that there is a complete paradigm of pronominal articles, including 1st person pronouns; and that there are only three major usage contexts in which nominal expressions are not marked with pronominal articles.

On the other hand, one of course also checks descriptions of genetically or areally related languages to see whether they describe a similar phenomenon. In the case of Wooi, van den Heuvel’s description of the neighboring SHWNG language Biak makes use of the term *pronominal article* and provides a detailed description of their formal and semantic properties (van den Heuvel 2006: 65–69, 201–223). Inter alia, he shows that they are formally largely identical to the free forms of the pronoun (2006:66), that they need a phonological host (2006:68), that they occur with the word for *sun* in utterances such as ‘the sun was close to setting’ (2006:201), and that they do not occur with proper names and locational nouns (2006:220f).

Arnold (2017:277–281) reports on pronouns used adnominally in Ambel, another SHWNG language somewhat further afield than Biak that belongs to a different subgroup of the SHWNG branch. While the use of pronouns in this language appears to be much less frequent than in Biak, the adnominal use of plural pronouns in Ambel not only conveys additive and associative plural readings, but also partitive ones, as illustrated in (8).

- (8) *mé sia la-tó lil, mé sia la-tó doí*
 person 3P 3P.AN-live landwards person 3P 3P.AN-live closed.bay
 ‘some people lived in a landwards direction, some people lived [on the coast of the] closed bay’ (Arnold 2017:280)

Kluge (2017:344–365) provides a very detailed description of pronominal articles in the regional lingua franca, Papuan Malay. Her section on pronominal articles contains dozens of references to the general literature on these articles as well as to descriptions of other languages – primarily Austronesian (including a systematic overview of other Malayic varieties), but also Germanic and Australian languages. The wealth of formal and semantic properties she uses in her analysis of the Papuan Malay pronominal articles clearly derives from these other descriptions. Among many other properties, she discusses the completeness of the paradigm (no article uses of the 1st person singular pronoun), the distinction between long and short forms, the fact that both additive and associative plural readings are conveyed by plural pronouns, the different uses of the 2nd person singular pronoun in direct quotations and in reported speech, anaphoric uses, and so on.

The result of comparisons with similar phenomena in other languages is a list of formal and semantic properties that help to describe the Woori construction as precisely as possible. Table 1 provides examples of the properties that can be easily culled from the literature just mentioned. It is not complete; it is intended merely to illustrate the kinds of properties that emerge from crosslinguistic comparison.⁶ In the remainder of this paper these properties will be referred to as *crosslinguistic (grammatical) properties*. As already mentioned in section 1, they significantly overlap with what Haspelmath (2018) calls *etic comparative concepts*. An alternative label would be *typological variable* (Bickel 2007).

Crosslinguistic property	Applies to Woori NP-final article
occurs NP-finally	+
same number and person values as free pronoun	+
complete paradigm of pronouns used in NP-final position	- (1s excluded)
distinction between long and short forms	-
used with pronouns	-
used in all NPs	-
additive plural readings	+
associative plural readings	+
partitive reading	-
used with proper names	+
used in expressions for unique referents	+
used in first mentions	+
...	

Table 1: (Incomplete) list of formal and semantic properties that are crosslinguistically attested for pronouns in determiner-like function

This list – and similar ones can be produced for every construction or formative to be described in a grammar – should make it clear that it is not only possible, but also useful (and, in fact, given the human propensity for comparison, unavoidable) to compare constructions and formatives across languages when one engages in language description. Two important points for the present discussion follow. First, there are obviously linguistically relevant properties of language-specific constructions that can easily be identified and hence compared across different languages. Second, absolute claims that language-specific constructions are incommensurable are wrong. There are some properties of language-specific constructions which usually cannot be usefully compared to each other. A trivial

⁶ Haspelmath (2018:93) claims: “It is also sometimes said that descriptions should be ‘typologically informed’ (e.g., Himmelmann 2016) but it is unclear what exactly this means ...”. This comes as a bit of a surprise from the author of one of the most widely used typologically informed descriptive grammars (Haspelmath 1993). In case this is not just a rhetorical manoeuvre, the preceding paragraphs and Table 1 should make it clear “what exactly [it] means” for a description to be typologically informed.

example is their exact segmental shape (e.g. English 3rd person plural *they* is clearly different from Wooi *hnia*). But the existence of such properties does not imply that everything about a language-specific construction is incommensurable. To make such a claim is an improper simplification, which neglects a core practice in language description (see also Moravcsik 2016:418; Lehmann 2018:34).

Note that the argument so far is *not* about terminology, but about being precise with regard to the properties exhibited by a given language-specific formative or construction. The question is not whether Wooi ‘has’ an associative plural construction or pronominal articles. The question is which formal and functional properties characterize the construction with NP-final pronouns in Wooi. This is best done by comparison to exemplars of similar constructions in other languages.

The argument should also have made it clear that crosslinguistic comparison does not necessarily lead to unduly applying categories and analyses of one language to another (e.g. describing constructions from Philippine or Mesoamerican languages in terms of the Latin case system). Quite the opposite. Crosslinguistic comparison as just illustrated is about bringing out the differences between potentially similar constructions from different languages. The repeated declarations made in the recent debate that each language should be described without presuming the presence of categories and constructions known from other languages are of course true. (But when was the last time a grammar of a non-European language was published that presents its analysis of argument marking in terms of the Latin case system?) From this methodological principle, however, it does not follow that one must not compare constructions and formatives across languages. Comparison does not contaminate description.

Importantly, many of the properties assembled in Table 1 would not arise from language-internal comparisons, such as comparing the distribution of Wooi NPs with final pronouns to those without. Such comparisons are of course also important for comprehensive description, but their results differ in many ways from crosslinguistic comparisons. Language-internal comparison cannot replace crosslinguistic comparison, and the distributions resulting from language-internal comparisons can actually also be compared crosslinguistically, as further discussed in the following section.

The claim that comparison is in fact unavoidable implies that language comparison is not simply a possibly useful, but nevertheless optional extra that one may or may not make use of when describing a language. Methodologically and conceptually, the impact crosslinguistic comparison has on language description is of a totally different kind compared to more coincidental concerns such as whether one organizes one’s examples in a digital database or links them to the text corpus, etc. The latter concerns may also have a significant impact on the quality of the description, but they are not unavoidable and hence not necessary in the way that the evidence emerging from crosslinguistic comparison is.

Sill, typologists such as Lazard and Haspelmath appear to want to claim that the crosslinguistic grammatical properties illustrated in Table 1 are somehow not really relevant for defining language-specific grammatical categories such as the Wooi Pronominal Articles (capitalization here conventionally signals the fact that reference is made to a language-specific category). Haspelmath’s

(2018) reaction to the argument presented in Auwera & Sahoo (2015), which is similar in several aspects to the one presented here, provides an illustration of this view.

Auwera & Sahoo's main example are similatives, i.e. English *such* and functionally similar items in Dutch and the Indo-Aryan language Odia. Their argument begins with a language-*internal* comparison of *such* to English Adjectives, the English Definite Article and the English Demonstrative *this*. They show that *such* has thirty-four formal and semantic properties that are only partially shared by the other three items (the greatest overlap is with Demonstratives, with which nine properties are shared). Thus, for example, "*such* fits a [(all) x N]_{NP} construction but only when N is plural count or mass" (2015:143f) or "*such* has a predicative use" (2015:148f), both shared by English Adjectives but not by the Definite Article or the Demonstrative. They then go on to ask which of these thirty-four properties also apply to Dutch and Odia similatives, clearly demonstrating that said properties can be applied crosslinguistically, often of course with negative results (only six of the thirty four properties are shared between the three languages; 2015:170f).

Haspelmath comments on Auwera & Sahoo's argument as follows:

And van der Auwera and Sahoo (2015: 3) say that three categories A, B, C from three different languages could simply be compared by checking whether they share the features a, b, c, d, and so on. But this approach cannot work, because categories are defined within particular systems, which are different across languages. ... And when van der Auwera & Sahoo (2015) compare demonstratives of a special type in English, Dutch and Odia (*such*, *zulk* and *emiti/semi*), they do not do so with respect to the defining features of these items but with respect to other comparative concepts which actually play no role in defining these items. (Haspelmath 2018:95)

Given that Auwera & Sahoo discuss thirty-four formal and semantic properties that specifically characterize English *such* vis-à-vis English Adjectives, Articles and Demonstratives, and that many of these properties are actually taken from standard descriptive work on English such as Quirk et al. (1985), it is difficult to make sense of the claim that these properties "play no role in defining" *such*. This claim is obviously not in agreement with the actual practice of the grammarians of English, who make liberal use of crosslinguistic properties in defining the categories of English grammar. The only way this claim can be upheld is in a rigorously Saussurean conception of grammatical categories (and linguistic signs more generally) as purely relational entities in a system of oppositions where substantive properties have no real role to play (see also the quote from Lazard in the following section).⁷

⁷ Haspelmath's (2018:87 FN 3) response to other critics is similar to the one just quoted regarding Auwera & Sahoo (2015): "I disagree with Lander and Arkadiev's (2016: 404) statement that 'if comparative concepts are not felt to be relevant for the grammars of different languages, they are usually not viable'. On the contrary, many comparative concepts (e.g., all the etic ones) are not usable for language description ...". Table 1 includes quite a few etic comparative concepts used in actual language descriptions. Not to mention the fact that Dahl's (1985) tense-aspect questionnaire and similar tools, which are also given as examples for etic comparative concepts by Haspelmath, have been used countless times in language descriptions. Hence, Haspelmath's assertion that these resources "are not usable for language description" is difficult to justify. Unless his remark is to be understood as an exhortation ("Don't use visual stimuli, questionnaires, etc. for language description!"). Note that, unlike in the case of the quote pertaining to Auwera & Sahoo, this statement appears to be clearly intended to pertain to grammaticographical practice, not to the methodological question of how to define a language-specific category.

Now, Saussure's theory of the purely abstract values that define linguistic signs in an overall system is highly problematic and controversial in a number of ways (cp. Wells 1947:13f, Holdcroft 1991:107–133, Normand 2004, among many others). While the usefulness of the notion of opposition that is a cornerstone of this theory is beyond doubt, there is no current grammatical theory or framework that explicitly subscribes to the idea that linguistic signs can be adequately described exclusively in terms of oppositions. In fact, a descriptive grammar written in purely Saussurean terms remains to be written. The closest that structuralist linguistics has ever been to putting Saussure's basic tenets into descriptive practice are the attempts made in the American structuralist tradition to conceive of linguistic description in purely distributional terms, most famously in Harris's (1951) *Methods in Structural Linguistics*. But, as further discussed in the next section, this approach has long been shown to be unworkable. Distributional analysis requires reference to semantic and phonetic substance. This means that language description has to make use of the kinds of crosslinguistic properties illustrated in Table 1 for theoretical reasons as well.

3. Distributional analysis needs theoretical and substantive controls

In the argument for separating language description from language comparison, language description is typically portrayed as consisting exclusively of distributional analyses. Distributional analysis, in turn, is portrayed as straightforward and self-contained, i.e. requiring no input other than language data. Lazard's exposition here is particularly clear (see also the quote from Haspelmath above in which he asserts that language-specific "categories are defined within particular systems" (2018:95)):

The task of the descriptive linguist is to identify the units and describe the complex set of relationships between them. His methodology is to discern the oppositions which exist between units at different levels. His aim is to establish the whole set of those oppositions, which is the system or, in other words, the specific form of the language. (Lazard 2002:147)

Some aspects of the distribution and possibly other formal and semantic properties of a language-specific formative or construction are without doubt language-specific. However, Lazard's characterization of the descriptive enterprise is incomplete. It downplays the role that theoretical assumptions (e.g. rule economy) and substantive evidence (i.e. semantic and phonetic considerations), play in constraining and guiding distributional analyses. Since the appearance of Harris 1951 and the ensuing criticism (cp., for example, Fowler 1952 and Hymes & Fought 1981:146 for further references and discussion), it has been well established that purely distributional analyses are impossible (see also Lehmann 2018:35f). As pointed out in many a syntactic textbook, for example, distributional tests of all kinds need to be controlled semantically to ensure that one deals with the same construction, as illustrated by the following classic example of a semantically unconstrained application of the substitution test. Substituting *really* for *thinks that the fish* changes the overall semantics of the construction, and hence is not valid.⁸

⁸ The syntactic structure of course changes as well. But inasmuch as distributional tests are designed to provide evidence for syntactic structure, the validity of such a test must not be questioned with reference to changes to the syntactic structure (otherwise the argument becomes circular). The important fact here – and one that can also be straightforwardly ascertained when working on a language one knows very little about – is that in one case it is the fish that stinks and in the other case it is John.

(9) *John [thinks that the fish] stinks.*

John [really] stinks. (Carnie 2008:19 FN14)

Similarly, it is widely agreed that there are phonetic constraints on how far one can push the concept of allophonic variation. The proposal, for example, that [h] and [ŋ] are in allophonic distribution in English where the former occurs only syllable-initially and the latter only syllable-finally, is – to the best of my knowledge – no longer upheld in any phonological analysis of English. Allophonic relations presuppose a level of phonetic similarity that is missing for the pair [h] and [ŋ] (cp. Gussenhoven & Jacobs 1998:57, Hayes 2009:54f, *inter alia*).

Theoretical assumptions such as rule economy come into play in particular with regard to the fact that there is no limit to the fine-grainedness of distributional analyses, which can always be pushed further to reach their logical endpoint of establishing single-member classes – each word and each grammatical formative is of course in some ways unique in its distribution. The art of carrying out productive distributional analyses lies in the ability to identify contexts which allow one to group together the largest set possible of elements that share important properties. That is, distributional analysis is guided by the search for generalizations. It does not make sense to use the availability of ablaut triplets (e.g. *sing sang sung*) as the main criterion for delimiting the class of English verbs, for which the ability to mark a 3rd singular present form by suffixing –s or the ability to be suffixed with –ing are the more comprehensive defining features. Rule economy demands that the class of English verbs is defined in such a way that the most general processes applying to verbs, including the formation of 3rd singular present forms, do not need to be stated for several smallish classes, but only once for the largest possible class. Note that typically such large classes are not merely inventions by the linguistic analyst, but tend to have some reality for speakers as well, as shown by changes pertaining to all members of a large class (e.g. all English nouns, regardless of declension class, lose most of their case marking in the transition from Old to Middle English).

Finally, the actual practice of distributional analysis is of course always guided by semantic or phonetic considerations, in addition to what one knows about the grammar of other languages. One considers, for example, whether words denoting properties show formal commonalities that set them apart from words that do not denote properties.

There is much more to say on this topic. But for current purposes it is sufficient to note that the substantive considerations that play a role in guiding and constraining distributional analyses are of the same type as the substantive considerations that play a role in crosslinguistic comparison (e.g. semantic argument roles, phonetic similarity, expressions denoting properties, etc.). Hence, the statement by Haspelmath (2010: 678) that “language-particular categories are defined formally, whereas general-level concepts may contain semantic elements” is not correct, as it presupposes that distributional analyses do not need to be constrained by substantive considerations. Once again, the claim that description can be neatly separated from comparison does not hold up.

Distributional analyses are also claimed to be language-specific in a different sense. Haspelmath (2018:95) puts it this way: “Comparative concepts, by contrast, are defined in a way that is independent of distributions within particular systems.” There is no argument provided for why this should be the case. Yet this claim is far from self-evident. On the contrary, it seems to me that one may

very well make an argument as to why language-specific distributions can and should be included in language comparison, as illustrated here again with the Wooi pronominal articles.

The Wooi pronominal articles are in complementary distribution with only one other class of formatives, the numerals, which may also occur in the NP-final slot (the third option is to have neither pronoun nor numeral), as in (10).

- (10) *hengko mawong vaw koru*
 3P-take gong DET two
 ‘they brought two gongs’ [MARGA_Kendi1 157]

In fact, things are a bit more complicated as numerals may also occur in a slot of their own (cp. (1)). Here they are not in complementary distribution with any other adnominal modifier. As seen in example (11), in this position numerals generally occur with numeral classifiers.

- (11) *mahoy rapa ne tiang raung koru ne*
 sit roast 1s.POSS fish CLF two SPRX
 ‘I sit and roast my two fish’ [conversation_siang 090]

When in their own slot, the numerals thus “obey” Greenberg’s Universal 20 (1963/66:87): “When any or all of the items (demonstrative, numeral, and descriptive adjective) precede the noun, they are always found in that order. If they follow, the order is either the same or its exact opposite.” According to this universal, the following orders are allowed: DET NUM ADJ N, N DET NUM ADJ, N ADJ NUM DET. Not allowed is, inter alia, *N ADJ DET NUM. Thus, prima facie Wooi numerals in NP-final position appear to be a violation of Universal 20.

Before considering NP-final numerals in Wooi a proper counterexample to Universal 20, however, one should investigate whether the deviant order exhibits properties that allow for a precise delimitation as to when apparent numerals may occur after determiners. In the Wooi case, an argument can be made to show that the numeral in phrase-final position has a determiner-like function. Part of the argument is the fact that numerals in this position are in complementary distribution with pronominal articles. The analysis is further supported by an investigation of the usage contexts. The Wooi NP-final numerals primarily occur when major participants are newly introduced, as in (10) above and in (12), and when a referent consisting of a set of entities is further subdivided into subsets, as in (13).

- (12) *ariang vaw ehni riama*
 child DET one -3S-come
 ‘a child came’ [pear_movie_Yuslince_JEN 029]

- (13) *mara nawang vaw koru onung*
 so basket DET two full
 ‘so two of the baskets were full (and the third one empty)’ [pear_movie_Yuslince_JEN 014]

Hence, the “deviating” position of the numerals is very much in line with their function. In this regard, it is well to remember that especially the numeral *one* is often grammaticized as an indefinite determiner, in which case it typically also occurs in the determiner slot at the edge of NPs.

Inasmuch as this argument is accepted, it suggests a possible modification of Greenberg’s Universal

20 along the following lines: Universal 20 only holds for numerals that are not in complementary distribution with pronominal articles. The usefulness of this modification of course depends on the extent to which it can account for other exceptions to Universal 20, a task not further pursued here (see Dryer 2018 for recent discussion and references).

In the current context, what is important is that the preceding argument provides an illustration for the claim that it is possible, and indeed makes sense, to include statements about language-specific (complementary) distributions in establishing crosslinguistic generalizations. Auwera & Sahoo (2015, 2018) make an even more far-reaching claim in this regard. In some instances, such as in the case of similatives, they claim, crosslinguistic comparison of distributions may in fact provide the main argument for establishing a language-specific category.⁹ Even if one does not agree with this view, the current section should have made it clear that the crosslinguistic properties discussed in section 1 (and illustrated in Table 1) are an integral part of distributional analyses and hence of language description.

To summarize, ‘pure’ distributional analyses are impossible. Rather, distributional analyses always involve theoretical and substantive considerations, the latter being of the same kind as the ones that play a role in crosslinguistic comparison. Furthermore, distributional facts themselves can also be compared across languages. Clearly, the distribution of a particular formative or construction is always language-specific and the totality of distributional relations found in a given language are always unique in some ways. But from this widely shared assessment it does not follow that language-specific distributions do not have substantive characteristics in common. Hence it is false to conclude that, because distributional facts are in some aspects unique and thus highly language-specific, such facts cannot be directly compared across languages.

Language comparison does not need a completely different conceptual framework, but rather can – and must – build on the commonalities that language-specific categories share, i.e. the crosslinguistic properties amply illustrated in the preceding section (ordering relations, common usage contexts, etc.). In fact, as further discussed in the next section, current typologists largely agree that crosslinguistically identifiable properties of language-specific categories provide the basis for language comparison. Disagreements primarily pertain to the way more complex comparative notions such as *subject* are to be conceived of.

4. Where is the problem in language comparison?

Somewhat ironically and perhaps even paradoxically, most typologists partaking in the current debate on the conceptual and methodological foundations of language comparison largely agree in their practices when comparing languages. That is, they all make use of substantive and formal properties of grammatical formatives and constructions that can be easily identified across different languages, such as the ability to convey a particular meaning or to occur in a specific position in a larger unit.

⁹ The argument roughly runs like this: Investigated solely within one language system, similatives such as *such* tend to be considered a special subclass of another category, often demonstratives, even though they do not share very many properties with them. Comparing similatives across languages shows that the same kind of properties, and usually the ones that separate similatives from related categories, appear again and again, thus providing an argument for the view that similatives make up a category of their own.

They also largely agree that the typological enterprise can be roughly characterized as being about identifying and explaining:

- crosslinguistically recurring clusters of these properties;
- correlations between such recurring clusters;
- correlations between recurring clusters and non-linguistic phenomena (speech physiology, processing constraints, settlement histories, etc.).

This is a very broad and fairly abstract characterization of the typological enterprise. Differences in approach and method emerge once one starts to be more precise about how exactly clusters and correlations are to be identified and what kind of explanations are considered relevant. Definitional approaches start with a tentative definition of a cluster (e.g. a comparative concept such as Lazard's 'prototypical action', further discussed below) and explore whether the structures identified by it allow for crosslinguistic generalizations. Dimensional approaches attempt to identify larger dimensions or domains where linguistic structures with roughly the same functions can be compared along multiple measures, as for example in canonical typology (Round & Corbett 2019).¹⁰

Autotypologizing approaches assume that relevant clusterings become visible when sufficiently large databases of language-specific formatives and constructions annotated for typological variables (= crosslinguistic properties) are scanned with the appropriate statistical methods (Bickel & Nichols 2002, Bickel 2007). Experimental approaches attempt to provide evidence for crosslinguistically significant clusterings by showing that speakers make consistent use of them in experimentally controlled conditions (e.g. Bickel et al. 2015 on the agent-first bias in language processing, Himmelman et al. 2018 on interrater evidence for the crosslinguistic identifiability of intonational phrases).

As it currently stands, it is not clear that there is one single perfect approach to identifying and explaining crosslinguistically recurring clusters of crosslinguistic properties. In fact, it is not unlikely that different aspects of language structure may require different approaches. This is not a problem as long as one can agree on the common empirical basis for evaluating the different approaches and proposals. The core issue in this regard is the ability to provide operational definitions for the claim that a particular language-specific formative or construction is an example of a presumed crosslinguistic cluster concept. Inasmuch as one denies that crosslinguistic properties exist, one runs into the fundamental problem of how to link crosslinguistic cluster concepts to language-specific formatives.

Before further exploring this issue, it will be well to recall that there are many cluster concepts for which it is uncontroversial that the properties used to define language-specific and crosslinguistic

¹⁰ An older and very different kind of dimensional approach is Seiler's UNITYP framework (Seiler 2000). This is based on the assumption that language is a problem-solving device enabling communication based on mental representations of the world. There are different kinds of problems to solve, such as how to represent objects (called *apprehension*) and how to represent events (called *participation*). Each problem constitutes one dimension of orderly variation with regard to the different solutions developed for it in the languages of the world.

Another dimensional approach is the study of grammaticization paths as a network of historically interrelated form-function pairs where the limits of a domain are defined by the attested developments of specific grammatical formatives (e.g. Lehmann 2002, Bybee et al. 1994).

clusters almost totally overlap. Beck (2016) calls these *portable terms*,¹¹ noting that these terms are equally well suited to be used in reference to language-specific and crosslinguistic grammatical units. Haspelmath (2018), who also adopts this terminology, notes that in these instances crosslinguistic cluster concepts “do not differ greatly in their definition from the corresponding descriptive categories” (2018:103). There “are quite a few of them”, as Haspelmath remarks (2018:103), mentioning *personal pronoun, second person, demonstrative, polar question, accusative, instrumental, comitative, future tense, past tense, dual, plural, cardinal numeral, conditional clause, bilabial, velar, fricative, and nasal stop* as examples.

Where, then, is the problem in language comparison? As just mentioned, there are different ways to approach the task of defining crosslinguistically applicable cluster concepts. These differences become particularly clear in the case of non-portable cluster concepts including *subject, relative clause* and *adjective*. For these cluster concepts there are currently no widely agreed crosslinguistic definitions. But as also just noted, this is in principle not a major problem as long as authors make it clear how exactly they identify the language-specific specimens of a non-portable cluster concept used in a crosslinguistic study.

As far as I can see, it is exactly at this point that Martin Haspelmath’s proposals (e.g. 2010, 2018) for a rigorous and sharp distinction between descriptive categories and comparative concepts has given rise to a number of confusions and irritations. I only take up two of these in the following two subsections. Before doing this, however, I should make it clear that I take it as a given that most modern typologists are in agreement that a distinction has to be made between language-specific categories and crosslinguistic cluster concepts.¹² Disagreements exist as to the extent to which such a difference exists and as to how it should be conceived of (e.g. crosslinguistic cluster concepts as representing the common core of similar language-specific categories or as prototypes of such categories, etc.). Haspelmath here takes an extreme position by proposing that language-specific categories and crosslinguistic concepts are ontologically different and, relatedly, that the latter are essentially arbitrary.

4.1 Can language-specific categories and crosslinguistic cluster concepts be ontologically different?

Especially in his more recent writings, Haspelmath makes the claim that there is an ontological difference between language-specific categories and crosslinguistic cluster concepts (= his comparative concepts). He says, for example: “Comparative concepts are a different kind of entity than descriptive categories” (Haspelmath 2018: 84). Crosslinguistic concepts are claimed to make up a type of category of their own, descriptive categories are a subtype of social categories, and both strongly differ from natural kinds. The problems here are manifold. Perhaps most surprisingly, Haspelmath’s discussion of this topic does without a single reference to the 2000 years of reasoning

¹¹ Beck’s use of *term* roughly corresponds to what others call *concepts* in the current debate. Inasmuch as purely terminological issues are concerned, he speaks of *labels*.

¹² Recall that Comrie already introduced in 1976 the convention to use initial capitals to refer to language-specific grammatical categories (e.g. *Perfective*) in contrast to using lower-case terms (e.g. *perfective*) to refer to crosslinguistic cluster concepts. While this convention has not been taken up as widely as may perhaps have been useful (and is rarely, if ever, applied in descriptive grammars), the distinction is made in all the typological literature I am familiar with.

and argument about human categorization in Western philosophy and science. Unsurprisingly, then, Spike (2019) is able to show that Haspelmath's work relies on a rather naïve conception of ontology and categories, and on assumptions long refuted in the literature (see also Round & Corbett 2019 and Dahl 2016, among others).

In the context of the current discussion, the major issue is as follows. As repeatedly noted throughout this section, language comparison obviously presupposes that it is possible to identify language-specific specimens of the crosslinguistic concept under investigation. This is usually done by making use of crosslinguistically identifiable properties of grammatical constructions and formatives such as the ones amply illustrated in section 2. Haspelmath himself uses this methodology when he, for example, defines an *adjective* as “a lexeme that denotes a descriptive property and that can be used to narrow the reference of a noun” (Haspelmath 2010:670). Now, if a crosslinguistic concept is defined in terms of such properties and if descriptive categories have to have these properties in order to be identifiable as being instances of the crosslinguistic concept, how can there be a major ontological difference between the two?

Possibly, Haspelmath has something else in mind when he making his claims about an ontological difference. In replying to criticism in Auwera & Sahoo (2015:140), he states they “are right when they observe that not only comparative concepts but also descriptive categories are ‘made by linguists’ but the difference is that linguistic categories must exist for productive language use to be possible, independently of linguists. Different speakers may use different categories, just as different linguists may prefer different categories, but categories of some kind must exist. (In contrast, comparative concepts do not exist in the absence of comparative linguists.)” (Haspelmath 2018:92f). But this would appear to make things even worse. If language comparison is not grounded in any kind of reality independent of the comparative linguist, one is left questioning the value in engaging in this enterprise at all. The reasoning here appears to be a consequence of the second extreme position that Haspelmath advocates, i.e. the supposed arbitrariness of crosslinguistic concepts.

4.2 Are crosslinguistic cluster concepts arbitrary?

Crosslinguistic cluster concepts, in particular what he calls non-portable category-like comparative concepts, are characterized by Haspelmath as being effectively arbitrary, as is obvious from the following quotes:

[...] comparative concepts are linguist specific (in the sense that every linguist is free to define her or his own concepts). (Haspelmath 2010:674)

[...] comparative concepts are defined by typologists in such a way that they allow them to capture interesting generalizations, or simply salient different language types. Thus, comparative concepts cannot be right or wrong, [...]. They can only be more or less productive, in that they allow the formulation of more or less interesting subdivisions and generalizations. (Haspelmath 2010: 678)

That is, Haspelmath adopts what was called a definitional approach to crosslinguistic cluster concepts and language comparison in the introduction to this section. The defining characteristic of such an approach pertains to the fact that one starts with a definition and then goes on to see how far the proposed definition can go. While in principle definitional approaches have a place in science in

general and in linguistic typology in particular, the way Haspelmath presents and practices this approach is highly problematic for the reason set out below, and which is directly related to the ontological distinctions discussed in the preceding section.

Haspelmath exaggerates the arbitrary aspects of crosslinguistically applicable definitions at the risk of rendering them devoid of any empirical content. If one emphatically states, without further hedging, that “comparative concepts cannot be right or wrong”, one risks being seen as an advocate of an anything-goes conception of science, with alternative truths, downplaying of facts, etc. This is aggravated by the fact that in his methodological writings Haspelmath eschews the question of what counts as empirical evidence in language comparison.

His actual practice in this regard, as just said, is in line with most other practitioners in the field, i.e. that language-specific constructions have crosslinguistic properties, as argued here and by many other authors on the topic (cp. references in section 1). In his methodological writings, Haspelmath is not clear as to whether his descriptive categories do not include crosslinguistic properties as a matter of principle, or whether he believes that they do, but they play no role in language description. In the former case, all comparative concepts would be empirically void. In the latter case, his characterization of language description would be erroneous along the lines sketched out in sections 2 and 3, but the comparative concepts would be viable as far as they go.

In emphasizing the arbitrariness of comparative concepts, Haspelmath follows Lazard (2002 and elsewhere), but misunderstands (or misrepresents) an essential aspect of Lazard’s argument. Lazard makes a very clear distinction between the initial phase of developing a hypothesis for comparing grammatical structures across languages and a later phase in which some robust findings have been achieved. When commencing crosslinguistic comparisons, Lazard holds, researchers work with “arbitrary conceptual frameworks” which are “logically arbitrary, which means that they are the product of the linguist’s free choice” (Lazard 2002:147). The formulation here is repeated almost word for word in the quotes from Haspelmath (2018) above. However, there is a major difference in that Lazard immediately hedges his statement on the arbitrariness of initial conceptual frameworks by adding that conceptual frameworks “are not haphazardly chosen” (Lazard 2002:147). Instead, they rest on the researcher’s knowledge of languages and intuition, not to mention on common sense.

Lazard’s primary example of an arbitrary conceptual framework is “the notion of a prototypical action”, further defined as “an effective volitional discrete action performed by a controlling agent and actually affecting a well individuated patient” (Lazard 2002:151f). This notion allows one to identify what Lazard calls the “major biactant construction” (Lazard 2002:152) in the languages of the world, which may then be compared to each other in a number of ways. Lazard’s main interest pertains to the systematic co-variation between syntactic deviations from the major biactant construction and the semantics of the deviating construction, which he summarizes under the notion of “generalized transitivity” (Lazard 2002:155) and more specifically the “transitivity gradient” (Lazard 2002:157). His major claim is that the crosslinguistically observable variation in the structure and meaning of transitive verbal predications, including differential object marking, incorporation and passivization, can be organized along a cline from highly transitive to intransitive constructions (Lazard 2002:165f).

This is not the place to further detail or evaluate Lazard's specific proposals for crosslinguistic generalizations pertaining to transitive constructions. What is of interest here is the fact that Lazard leaves no doubt about the fact that he believes that successful crosslinguistic comparison results in falsifiable claims about human languages and that the conceptual apparatus used to express these claims refers to objectively verifiable realities. Thus, Lazard asserts that the notions of *prototypical action* and *major biactant construction* "appear to have a twofold status"; that is, "as a starting point, they were only an intuitive arbitrary framework" but "at the end of the inquiry, they are part of the conclusion, which means that they take place in a (scientific) result" (Lazard 2002:166, see also p184f). And he adds:

The conclusion of our research is the structure symbolized by the transitivity gradient [...] Does it embody newly acquired knowledge about language? The value of the gradient lies in the correlation between its two parts, the upper part representing semantic relationships (*signifiés*) and the lower part representing morphosyntactic relationships (*signifiants*). The correlation constitutes *an objective new knowledge* concerning languages on several counts [...] (Lazard 2002:182; emphasis in original)

The transitivity gradient is presumably to be found in any language. If we are right, it is a property of human language, i.e., an INVARIANT or UNIVERSAL, and one which belongs to the core of syntactic structures. (Lazard 2002:183; capitalization in original)

In many of his writings, Haspelmath refers to Lazard as someone who shares his view "that there are no crosslinguistic categories" (Haspelmath 2010:667) and that comparative concepts are arbitrary (2010:678). In none of his writings, as far as I am aware, does he indicate that Lazard's views are considerably more sophisticated (and in line with the philosophy of science) and that the presumed arbitrariness of comparative concepts only pertains to the initial phase of the research process, as the above quotes should make unequivocal. That is, even though Haspelmath uses Lazard's exact words to characterize the presumed arbitrariness of crosslinguistic concepts, Lazard in fact does not share the view that crosslinguistic concepts are arbitrary, when the whole course of a crosslinguistic investigation is taken into consideration. And this, it would seem, is the majority view in the field.

Both Haspelmath and Lazard share the view that language description and language comparison should be strictly separated, based on the narrow Saussurean view that language-specific categories are exclusively definable in terms of oppositions (which they are not, see section 3 above). But Lazard does not link this distinction to an ontological one and clearly believes that the concepts used in crosslinguistic generalizations have falsifiable empirical substance and make predictions as to which structures are attested in human languages and which are not.

Haspelmath's approach to comparative concepts is strongly influenced by his major involvement in large scale comparative mapping enterprises such as the *World Atlas of Language Structures* (Dryer & Haspelmath 2013) and the *Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures* (Michaelis et al. 2013). In such enterprises, which bring together specialists for specific grammatical domains as well as specialists for particular languages and linguistic areas, there is a constant tension between the specialists' goal to adequately represent the complexity of the phenomenon at hand and the compilers' goal to produce a resource where the most basic and important similarities and differences between languages are easily identifiable and which, importantly, can be produced in a manageable time

frame. Under such circumstances, the definitions for the items that are to be included on a particular map are almost by necessity somewhat superficial. For instance, when *definite article* is simply defined as “morpheme which accompanies nouns and which codes definiteness, like *the* in English”, followed by an illustration of its anaphoric and associative anaphoric use in English (Haspelmath and the ApiCS Consortium 2013), with no attempt to properly distinguish between demonstratives and definite articles. While such a pragmatic approach to identifying crosslinguistically conspicuous clusters of properties may be legitimate, and perhaps unavoidable, when producing these resources, it would be disastrous to elevate it to the only proper methodology in crosslinguistic comparison.

5. Conclusion

This article has defended the view that language description and comparison are closely interlinked and cannot be sharply distinguished from each other. When one describes a language, one engages in crosslinguistic comparison, and when one compares linguistic structures one engages in (enhancing) description (minimally checking, often revising, the descriptions for accuracy and consistency, ideally also consulting primary data). The close link between description and comparison is a major source of the complexity of the two enterprises. Attempting to rigorously separate them risks trivializing them both. The close link is present on the level of actual practices: grammar writers constantly compare the constructions they describe to similar constructions in other languages (section 2). But it is also present on the theoretical and methodological (not to mention ontological) levels: language description requires reference to the same kind of substantive evidence that is also essential for language comparison (section 3). Furthermore, language-specific formatives and constructions have to have properties in common in order to make language comparison an empirical enterprise (section 4.1). In this sense, comparative constructs cannot be arbitrary or exclusively linguist-dependent (section 4.2).

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