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Intuitions in linguistic argumentation

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Abstract

Generative grammarians have relied on introspective intuitions of well-formedness as their primary source of data. The overreliance on this one type of data and the unsystematic manner in which they are collected cast doubt on the empirical basis of a great deal of syntactic theorizing. These concerns are illustrated with examples and one more detailed case study, concerning the English verb-particle construction.
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[L]anguage should be analysed by the methodology of the natural sciences, and there is no room for constraints on linguistic inquiry beyond those typical of all scientific work.

> Neil Smith, ''Foreword'' to Chomsky (2000: vii).

1. Introduction

The first conjunct of the quote above expresses a sentiment few linguists would disagree with. The second conjunct hints that some critics seek to saddle linguistics with arbitrary discipline-specific methodological restrictions. Quite the contrary, we argue, standards of data collection and analysis that are taken for granted in neighboring fields are widely

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ignored by many linguists. In particular, intuitions have been tacitly granted a privileged position in generative grammar. The result has been the construction of elaborate theoretical edifices supported by disturbingly shaky empirical evidence.

Two types of intuitions have played a central role in linguistic research over the past half century. The first, which we will call 'primary intuitions', are simply introspective judgements of a given linguistic expression's well-formedness or of its meaning. The second, which we dub 'secondary intuitions', are intuitions about why a given expression is (or is not) well-formed or has the meaning it has.

We have no quarrel in principle with the use of primary intuitions as evidence for theoretical claims. The way they are used in practice, however, is another matter. In Section 2, we discuss how primary intuitions are used in linguistic argumentation and identify two major problems: the way they are collected, and the overreliance on this one type of evidence.

Secondary intuitions are obviously important in helping investigators formulate interesting hypotheses, but we argue in Section 3 that they do not themselves constitute evidence for or against theoretical claims.

Section 4 presents a case study to illustrate the methodological points made in the previous two sections. In particular, we describe a series of investigations we carried out to try to test systematically an intuitive claim made by Chomsky (1955/1975). We conclude that the issue is too complex to be determined simply through introspection.

2. Primary intuitions

A central goal of linguistics is to characterize explicitly the knowledge of language represented in what Chomsky calls the "mind/brain" of a speaker. This knowledge manifests itself in the many ways we can and do use language. The most common use of language is conversation; another (at least in literate societies) is writing. Yet another way we can use language is by making introspective judgements about the well-formedness or meanings of expressions. Although most non-linguists rarely make such judgements consciously, it is not difficult to explain the task and to elicit such judgements, even from speakers with little formal education.

2.1. Variation across speakers

The robustness of many judgements of well-formedness is striking—so much so that it initially may seem sufficient to obtain a single native speaker's intuitions. Asking 20 English speakers to judge the well-formedness of *The cat is on the mat* or **Mat the on is cat the* seems pointless: we can be confident that they will all respond alike. Unfortunately, a great many of the crucial examples cited in the syntactic literature are not nearly so clearly good or bad. This is often acknowledged by authors who prefix their examples with some number of question marks.

Moreover, what one speaker finds unequivocally well-formed another speaker may find unequivocally ill-formed. This is clear with known dialect differences, such as those illustrated in (1).