



# Metalinguistic truisms and the emancipation of the language sciences



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## ABSTRACT

In his influential critiques of the theoretical foundations of the language sciences, Nigel Love claims that modern linguistics is based on “a cultural metafiction” and that it must “emancipate itself from what is no more than a profoundly important but nonetheless culturally parochial way of construing linguistic phenomena.” This paper reviews Love’s account of the historical sources and modern consequences of this cultural metafiction and asks why it is so frustratingly difficult to emancipate the language sciences from the epistemological presuppositions of this ethnocentric metafiction. In addressing these questions, the paper explores the accountability of the expert metalinguistic discourse of the language sciences to the normative rhetoric of lay metalinguistic practices – or, in Wittgenstein’s distinctive use of the term, to the ‘grammar’ of those practices.

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“The general form of propositions is: This is how things are.” That is the kind of proposition that one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing’s nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.

(Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §114)

One might simply say “O, rubbish!” to someone who wanted to make objections to the propositions that are beyond doubt. That is, not to reply to him but admonish him.

(Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §495).

## 1

One of the most important and influential themes in Nigel Love’s intellectual and literary career has concerned the need for the modern sciences of language to free themselves from the influence of what he has variously called a “second-order cultural superstructure”, namely, Western culture’s “metafiction” about language (Love, 2009, p. 34). As he puts it in his paper “On construing the world of language”: “Any would-be language science must start by emancipating itself” from this metafiction, which “is no more than a profoundly important but nonetheless culturally parochial way of construing linguistic phenomena” (Love, 1995, p. 388).

“[W]hat purports to be a culture-neutral science of language embodies a conceptualization of languages that was already in daily use for purposes of formal linguistic education in the culture whose product that science is. To say the least, that is a remarkable coincidence.” (Love, 1995, p. 381)

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As described in several of Love's published chapters and articles, the Western cultural metafiction represents speech utterances as superficially diverse manifestations of some portion of an abstract system called 'a language'. Moreover, it treats that system as something which exists in advance of any actual utterance and which remains invariant across the changing circumstances of actual speech events. "Why should this be so?", Love asks. "It's not as if ... languages are there for the finding" (Love, 1995, p. 378).

In his writings over the past three decades, Love has provided extensive support for his diagnosis of this cultural metafiction afflicting the language sciences. It is not my intention in this paper to offer additional argument for that diagnosis or for the treatment that he recommends: namely, to emancipate the language sciences from the metafiction. Instead, for the narrower purposes of this paper, I will simply take that diagnosis and recommendation for granted so that I can focus on a follow-up question: Given that other modern sciences (chemistry, anatomy, geology, etc.) have long since emancipated themselves from the culturally parochial fictions which dominated their subjects for centuries, why haven't the language sciences emancipated themselves from their cultural metafiction? After all, the arguments motivating the need for emancipation from this cultural metafiction have been around for at least half a century – not only in Love's influential publications, of course, or indeed in the publications of Love's late mentor, Roy Harris (1981, 1982, 1987) and of the many scholars influenced by Harris, but also in the writings of many other scholars (cf. Baumann and Briggs, 2003; Agha, 2007b; Linell, 2005). These arguments have been expressed often and motivated in a variety of ways. Evidence of many different kinds have been provided in their support. They have been frequently praised and never successfully rebutted—indeed rarely explicitly critiqued. So why haven't the language sciences emancipated themselves from the cultural metafiction to which they are apparently enslaved?

What I will argue is that such an emancipation is much more difficult to do than is usually acknowledged. It is, of course, more difficult than simply professing acceptance of Love and others' demonstration of the metafiction's pernicious influence on the language sciences. There is, after all, a difference between *being* emancipated and *asserting* that one is. If emancipating the language sciences from their cultural metafiction were that simple, it would have been achieved long ago. The source of the difficulty, I will argue, is not well-recognized, let alone sufficiently studied and understood. To succeed in emancipating the language sciences from the cultural metafiction to which they are enthralled, we need to look more closely at how that metafiction maintains such a forceful grip on discourse in the language sciences.

## 2

Before addressing this topic, it will help to provide an overview of the distinctive features of the metafiction. This can most easily be done by paraphrasing Love's account of the metafiction's historical emergence and subsequent development in Western culture. Love (1995) locates the metafiction's source in the tools and practices developed for the instrumental purposes of pedagogical grammar, as used in the Western educational tradition since classical antiquity. "[I]t is traditional grammar that has bequeathed to modern linguistic science its commitment to the idea that behind speech there are objects called 'languages.'" (Love, 1995, p. 380)

For the traditional grammarian a language consists of a fixed inventory of microunits (words) displayed in a dictionary as a set of correspondences between forms and meanings, which are combinable into macrounits (sentences) according to the rules laid out in a grammar book. The network of ideas underlying traditional grammar involves imposing on the continuum of linguistic differences between people at different times and places an analysis in terms of discrete linguistic systems (languages). Traditional grammar abstracts from interactive behavior deemed to involve a given such system what it sets up as the strictly linguistic aspects of that behavior. It then projects this abstraction as a body of knowledge which, if acquired by a learner, might be put to use in interactive episodes with existing speakers of the language in question. (Love, 1995, p. 380)

Love identifies some of the most important implications of the traditional pedagogue's conception of a language (1995, pp. 380–385):

- A language is an object and language-use is a form of behavior secondary to that object.
- Language use is founded on, and only possible because of, knowledge of the object.
- Utterances consist in the instantiation of abstract and invariant elements of the language.
- The acceptability of linguistic expressions solely concerns "a dimension of 'pure linguisticity' ... (sometimes called 'grammaticality') that potential utterances either have or do not have in the abstract". (Love, 1995, pp. 381–382).
- A language is a closed and homogenous system. The grammar book and the dictionary comprise the whole language: a totality which may in principle be known perfectly.

An important stage in this history occurs in the Renaissance, when this pedagogically-inspired conception of a language came to be exploited for the nationalist project of creating, codifying, and institutionalizing standardized written languages for the populations of the emerging European nation-states (cf. also Harris, 1981).

The Western concept of a language has for historical reasons been intimately bound up with ideas about nationhood and nationalism. Western nation states have in different degrees found it desirable to propagate authoritatively

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