



Scientism in the language sciences



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ABSTRACT

The article identifies two broad strands of scientism in modern linguistic thought. The first is that of mainstream linguistics which consists in the unwarranted scientisation of a culture-specific, second order metalinguistic discourse. The second, and the main focus of the paper, is that found in more recent naturalistic approaches to language and cognition, notably the Distributed Language Approach (DLA), which involves a dogmatic rejection of attempts to make sense of folk metalinguistic discourse. Both forms of scientism are characterised by their strong reductionism. It is argued that if enquiry into language is to be reconceived along more fruitful and humanistic lines, such scientistic reductionism is to be avoided. This requires taking seriously integrational linguistics' advocacy of a lay-orientated form of enquiry.

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'What, after all, have we to show for non-scientific or pre-scientific good judgment, or common sense, or the insights gained through personal experience? It is science or nothing.' B.F. Skinner (1971:152–3)

'We are not doing natural science.' Wittgenstein (PU, p.230)

'It takes more than thousands of linguists chanting in unison "Linguistics is a science" to make it so.' Roy Harris (2005:84)

1. Introduction

The question of whether modern linguistics or any of the other academic disciplines which may fall under the indeterminate shade offered by the umbrella of the so-called and largely self-styled 'language sciences' are fittingly and intelligibly regarded as scientific is not quite the same as asking whether a science of language is possible in principle and, if so, what its requirements, limitations and uses might be. Nevertheless, it is instructive to consider both questions in conjunction since they point to a related concern, namely that of establishing the legitimacy or illegitimacy of particular forms of enquiry. The purely linguistic question of whether or not a certain discipline is labelled as a science is ultimately of secondary importance and is not one by which its academic credentials automatically stand or fall, although this is not to deny the widespread prestige which accrues to those disciplines thought of as 'genuine' sciences and the scorn often heaped upon supposed 'pseudosciences'. We are not, then, dealing here solely with matters of semantics or rhetoric. As the above quotation from Roy Harris makes clear, there is – or at least ought to be – more to being a science than simply being called or calling oneself a science. However, rhetoric may be a pointer towards more significant convictions and, as I shall argue, what is of great

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importance is whether the practitioners of a particular discipline regard themselves as being engaged in genuine scientific work or in some quite different type of enquiry since this is likely to have a crucial impact on the type of assumptions made, the questions asked (and indeed regarded as askable), the conceptualisation of the object of enquiry and the methods of investigation adopted.

On the face of it, it would seem both reasonable and uncontroversial to assert that a minimum requirement for a credible 'science of language' is the ability to say with certainty what language is and unambiguously identify which phenomena in the world are to count as linguistic and those which are not. Failure to do so might signal one of two things; either a humble admission that we have yet to truly or fully discover what language actually is in which case the notion of a science of language still stands as something of a promissory note, but a potentially valid one nevertheless, or the recognition that the notion of language answers to no determinate range of phenomena, thereby all but ruling out the idea of a science of language from the off. Modern mainstream linguistics, however, can hardly be accused of either of these failings. After all, its preferred approach has been to supply a very definite answer to the question, admittedly sometimes following a fair degree of definitional gymnastics, and then proceed more or less securely in the belief that linguistics simply is the science of language and that linguists are indeed scientists, while perhaps also being philosophers, sociologists, pedagogues etc. into the bargain. Unfortunately, as various authors – most notably and lucidly Roy Harris (1980, 1981, 1997) – have shown, the answers which modern linguistics has supplied have turned out to be highly inadequate, not to say downright misleading. On this alternative view, modern linguistics is a science of bogus entities and implausible metaphysical postulates. In short, it is not really a science at all.

An underlying argument advanced in this article is that the near-compulsive desire to have a science of language has, in various guises throughout the course of modern linguistic thought, all too often instead resulted in scientism and in doing so diverted attention from more fruitful and humanistic avenues of linguistic enquiry. Two broad strands of scientism can be identified in contemporary thinking on language. The first is that of mainstream or orthodox linguistics and consists primarily in the unwarranted and pernicious scientisation of a culture-specific, second-order metalinguistic discourse (Love, 2009). That is to say it involves the misapplication of a scientific methodology and epistemological framework to the study of putative linguistic objects of dubious ontological status which it radically misconceives as *realia*. The scientism of orthodox linguistics is the relatively straightforward scientism of doing linguistics as though it were a science. Here we find a clear echo of Wittgenstein's criticism of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in which he takes Frazer to task for doing anthropology as if it too were a science (Child, forthcoming). The second form of scientism, and the principal focus of this paper, is one which can be located in certain more recent epistemically naturalistic approaches to language – most notably the Distributed Language Approach (DLA) – which tend to locate themselves outside of linguistics and style themselves as instead belonging to the cognitive and/or language sciences. The scientism of such approaches consists primarily in a reductionist or eliminativist rejection of non-scientific forms of understanding and, in particular, attempts to make sense of the *explananda* of lay metalinguistic and psychological discourse (see Taylor, 2015, for an overview).

One approach which in my view avoids either form of scientism (and any resultant metaphysics) is the integrational linguistic approach most strongly associated with the work of Roy Harris. It does so by recognising that where language is concerned, the kind of determinate object required for scientific enquiry can only be obtained through reification, abstraction and by decontextualising language from the real-life communicational episodes which give rise to it in the first place. Yet, as Harris (2000:78) notes, one cannot establish a science on the basis of abstractions. A form of linguistic enquiry conceived along such lines is not only scientifically suspect but more importantly an obstacle to the understanding of something more fundamental, namely human communication. The key to the integrationist position on both language and the possibility of a science of language is its affirmation of the *radical indeterminacy of the linguistic sign*. For integrationists, signs of any sort can only be rendered determinate in form or meaning by the contextualised sign-making activities of individuals and even then only provisionally since they are always subject to possible recontextualisation. The upshot of adopting this view is that there is then nothing open to inspection by third-party observers on which to base any science of language as a semiological phenomenon. As Harris and Hutton (2007:222–223) make clear, the consequence of such indeterminacy is that we are looking in wholly the wrong place if we expect science to provide us with fundamental insights into linguistic knowledge:

Integrationism is committed to a 'lay-oriented' analysis of communication in the following sense: that, where language is concerned, there is no basis of knowledge or expertise other than that available to any lay member of the community. This basis is the experience acquired by participation in the process of interaction with others [...] All the metalinguistic terms and concepts used in asking and answering questions about language are ultimately derived from – and have to be explicated by reference to – someone's first-order linguistic experience. If that explanatory chain cannot be satisfactorily established, then the linguist – not the lay person – has been led astray.

2. Science or scientism in linguistic enquiry?

At this stage of the discussion, I am obviously obliged to spell out more precisely what I take scientism to be in relation to the study of language and to say what, on my understanding, distinguishes it from science 'proper'. In doing so, it would be facile of me to simply parrot dictionary definitions or those offered by other authors. In this section, I shall therefore set out in fairly broad terms what I see scientism as consisting in and also identify certain core features common to some of the admittedly quite different theoretical approaches to language which I see as incorporating elements of scientism.

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