

Review

Leaving the myth behind: A reply to Adger (2015)

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Abstract

In this article we address some of the criticism of Vyvyan Evans' work by David Adger. We argue that Adger (i) fails to evaluate Evans' work appropriately, (ii) narrowly focuses on alleged misunderstandings but provides no thorough clarification of the Chomskyan framework, (iii) reveals an inadequate understanding of issues he claims expertise in, (iv) ignores work completed outside of the Chomskyan framework that casts legitimate doubt on the appropriateness of this framework, and, in related fashion, (v) fails to address specific challenges to the Chomskyan framework discussed by Evans. We suggest that any defender of the Chomskyan framework needs to address the following questions: [i] what are the specific theories Chomskyan are currently committed to, [ii] which concrete findings from developmental psychology and neurobiology support the Chomskyan framework, and [iii] how can the Chomskyan paradigm overcome the familiar, long standing challenges stated in the technical literature.

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Two recent publications by Vyvyan Evans (*The Language Myth* and a short essay *There is no language instinct*¹) have attracted unusually severe criticism from the minimalist community. While some of this criticism was presented informally in the blogosphere, Adger (2015) published his remarks in an academic journal, making them deserving of a reply.² Adger alleges that Evans seriously misunderstands the commitments of Noam Chomsky and generativist linguists³ and concludes “that the book and the article are useless for anyone coming from outside the field who wants to understand the issues” (Adger, 2015:76). Given the long tradition of misunderstandings of Chomskyan commitments, any thoroughgoing clarification ought to be welcomed.⁴ Unfortunately, Adger's remarks contribute little to such clarification because he (i) fails to evaluate Evans' work appropriately, (ii) narrowly focuses on alleged misunderstandings but provides no thorough

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¹ *The Language Myth* (Evans, 2014a) is a general audience book, and *Real Talk: There is no language instinct* (Evans, 2014b) is a précis essay loosely based on the book.

² This reply addresses only the remarks in Adger (2015). For a reply some of the other criticism see Evans (2015).

³ *The Language Myth* does not directly address, nor does it seek to address, a particular theory or programme argued for by Chomsky—it does not use terms such as ‘Minimalist Program’, ‘Generative Grammar’, and so on. Instead, it specifically focuses on the Universal Grammar thesis, as presented by Pinker (1994), and in Pinker's later popular writing, and the associated ‘worldview’, as evident in Pinker's popularisation. The book presents six myths, which it claims, collectively form what it dubs the ‘language myth’, as presented in Pinker's popular books on language and mind.

⁴ For some discussion of those misunderstandings see Behme (2014a,b).

clarification of the Chomskyan framework, (iii) reveals an inadequate understanding of issues he claims expertise in, (iv) ignores work completed outside of the Chomskyan framework that casts legitimate doubt on the appropriateness of this framework, and, in related fashion, (v) fails to address specific challenges to the Chomskyan framework discussed in *The Language Myth*. Instead of overcoming those doubts, he focuses on alleged misunderstandings and terminological issues that are largely irrelevant to his conclusion that currently “the best theories we have [to provide a scientific understanding of language] are all generative” (Adger, 2015:80). Therefore, Adger’s attempted rebuttal misses not only the intended target but also leaves unimpeded the inference that he has not attempted a refutation of the substantial challenges to the current Chomskyan framework because he cannot.

1. Building cannons to kill a fly

Since its publication *The Language Myth* has generated a surprising amount of hostile attention. One leading minimalist issued a call to (intellectual) arms: “criticise this in all venues, especially where non-linguists gather. Consider it part of your linguistic public service” (Hornstein, 2014). A “panel of experts” led a public “debunking”, accusing Evans of making serious errors and ignoring decades of research (Dunbar et al., 2014). Legions of minimalists invaded Evans’ Facebook page and imposed an extended debate about the exact wording of rather dated Chomskyan texts on him. In addition, the publisher of Evans’ book has been publicly reprimanded: “The scandal of [Evans’] published work goes beyond the work itself. The bigger scandal is that Cambridge University Press (Yes, CUP, the CUP!!) published this junk. . . . CUP has embarrassed itself with this book and it owes Generative Grammar an apology.” (Hornstein, 2015a) and it has been suggested that “either *Language* hates 2/3 of the field (always a possibility) or the editors are filled with self-loathing. . . . [and] that the editors have lost all critical sense and are willing to admit the most egregious junk into its journals (Hornstein, 2015b) because *Language* plans an extended review event of *The Language Myth*. Adger’s article condemns Evans for misunderstanding and misrepresenting virtually every detail of the theoretical commitments associated with the Chomskyan enterprise while saluting the Chomskyan revolution which, he asserts, has provided the requisite tools to investigate the “function [that] powers our ability to connect meaning with sound and sign, generating the linguistic structures we use in everyday life.” (Adger, 2015:76).

One might have expected this minimalist fury to have been generated by a monumental work introducing groundbreaking research which suddenly threatens a well-established and universally accepted framework. Yet, *The Language Myth* is a relatively slender volume aimed squarely at a non-academic audience; the tone is conversational throughout and jargon kept to a bare minimum. In addition to informal summaries of scientific work, the author provides a good deal of anecdotal evidence and discussion, its presentational style and tone is that of a popular, trade book, rather than an academic monograph, and it uses snappy rhetoric to make a somewhat “dry” subject matter as appealing as possible to a wide, lay audience. True to its provocative title, the book argues that Chomskyan Universal Grammar is a myth and both points to and criticises problems arising from the “rationalist language science” inspired by Chomsky and popularised by Steven Pinker’s influential book *The Language Instinct*. Evans suggests that the narrow focus on syntax impedes progress in research on the complex phenomenon of human language, and urges that researchers ought to move beyond misleading computer analogies and modularity concepts. In support of these arguments, *The Language Myth* presents research results from a wide variety of sources (e.g. paleo-archaeology, genetic dating of ancient DNA, computer modelling, evolutionary theory, cognitive anthropology, comparative physiology, human neuroanatomical architecture, experimental psychology, field linguistics, primatology, social cognition, linguistic typology, etc.) that, Evans claims, cast severe doubts on the narrowly focused Chomskyan framework, and show the benefits of considering language as a complex trait that evolved over time, embedded in general cognition and human culture.

One can, of course, question whether the evidence presented supports the conclusions drawn and one could also object to the informal style of presentation. Works directed at the general public should be especially carefully presented. The intended audience is unfamiliar with the issues discussed and cannot easily evaluate how the work discussed compares to other work in the field. Of course, making a scientific subject matter accessible, does lead, of necessity, to simplifying a particular topic. Hence, it is a matter of careful judgement as to how to present issues in order to remain as factually accurate as possible, while enabling lay readers to follow the gist of otherwise highly complex, and sometimes arcane theorising, and technical discussion. If *The Language Myth* has misrepresented one side in an ongoing scientific dispute and/or misled its intended audience about the main assumptions and commitments of the Chomskyan enterprise, especially about Universal Grammar, the public should be made aware of these failings. Yet, such clarification can be provided in a factual, dispassionate manner. Given the intensity of the negative reaction to *The Language Myth* among some minimalists, the general public—the intended audience of *The Language Myth*—may, accordingly, wonder whether this volume is considered particularly threatening because it presents entirely novel challenges to the Chomskyan paradigm.

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