

Review

More misrepresentation: A response to Behme and Evans 2015

David Adger *

Linguistics, Queen Mary University of London, United Kingdom

Received 12 May 2015; accepted 14 May 2015

Available online 27 June 2015



CrossMark

Abstract

This response to Behme and Evans (2015) points out that understanding and correct representation of perspectives to be criticised is crucial for any kind of engagement. It then sequentially examines the points raised and tries to distinguish the content of the argument from its surrounding rhetoric. It concludes that there is a paucity of the former and an abundance of the latter.

© 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Generative grammar; “Language instinct”; Recursion; Localization

1. Introduction

I'd like to begin on an ecumenical note. I thoroughly believe in theoretical pluralism in linguistics. The study of language is a vast field and our knowledge and understanding of language, though undoubtedly growing, is at a primitive stage. Because of this, I believe we need many researchers coming from different perspectives, tackling many different aspects of the phenomenon. My own personal research has included working with individuals who have backgrounds in constructionist approaches to linguistics, variationist sociolinguistics, cultural evolution, interactional sociolinguistics, and artificial language learning among others (Adger and Trousdale, 2007; Adger and Smith, 2005; Mesoudi et al., 2011; Cheshire et al., 2013; Culbertson and Adger, 2014). From this experience, I know that interactions between people working from very different theoretical and methodological viewpoints can be enlightening, enriching and lead to a general improvement in theoretical understanding. Indeed, of the authors of Behme and Evans (2015), Evans at least, has made important contributions to linguistics in his work in Cognitive Grammar. Cognitive Grammar has made empirical discoveries with cross-framework relevance and developed insightful theoretical accounts of aspects of language that generative grammar has little to say about. Both theoretical approaches make different contributions to the shared enterprise of understanding language.

However, not everyone shares this perspective on theoretical pluralism, as Evans (2014) (*The Language Myth*, hence TLM) makes clear. That book proposes that the perspective of generative grammar, at this point in time, has nothing to offer the study of language (indeed, TLM takes it to be inimical to progress). It attempts an attack on what it takes to be the fundamental commitments of the generative approach. I argued in Adger (2015) that this attack is a failure, because it is aimed at a caricature of the generative viewpoint. Behme and Evans (2015) (hence BE15) responds to my argument but, as I'll show below, there's little content to that response.

DOI of original article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2015.02.006>.

* Tel.: +44 07947883946.

E-mail address: d.j.adger@qmul.ac.uk.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2015.05.005>

0024-3841/© 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

The important point that emerges from this exchange, I believe, is that we linguists make better progress when we try to understand each other's work and learn from each other. Launching broadsides on each other's theoretical perspectives, whoever does the launching, is a waste of time and effort. However, when such broadsides are launched, it is important to correct misunderstandings and misrepresentations, so that people not directly engaged in the debate are not misled. This is what Adger (2015) does with respect to TLM, and I repeat that exercise here, attempting to draw out what is contentful in BE15, and to distinguish that from the associated rhetoric, in the hope that the various misconceptions about generative grammar begun in TLM and continued in BE15 will not proliferate further.

2. Content and rhetoric

BE15 begins with a couple of curious paragraphs that make the following argument: TLM has received a lot of hostile attention from generative linguists, which is surprising because TLM's arguments are unoriginal, having been made elsewhere in the literature; it is difficult to understand why Adger focuses so much effort on TLM which is a soft target, riddled with mistakes.

What is content and what is rhetoric here? In terms of content, BE's argument is a non-sequitur that includes an unfounded speculation about my motivations. In fact, TLM had a critical reception amongst generative linguists because it thoroughly misrepresents generative grammar and makes a series of basic errors. That some researchers have made criticisms of generative grammar is irrelevant to whether TLM misrepresented the field. As for my motivations, I gave TLM a negative review because of its misrepresentations and mistakes. It is also deliciously ironic that BE15 criticises me for focusing on a popular science "soft target" rather than on technical literature, when the main target of TLM itself is Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct*.

In terms of rhetoric, the first section of BE15 is couched in hyperbolic terms that do it no favours: I apparently 'condemn Evans'; 'legions of minimalists invaded' Evans' Facebook page; there was 'minimalist fury'; Chomsky has 'confessed' to his linguistics resting on ontological foundations that make no sense and paragraphs are packed with citations as though that counted as an argument.

Of course, I didn't condemn anyone. I simply criticised a published work, as is normal in academic discourse. Evans, on his public Facebook page, where he advertised TLM and his associated blog, provided a quote by Chomsky to back up an assertion that he was making about generative grammar, but it turned out that he had taken the quote out of context and Chomsky was actually saying the exact opposite – the people that corrected him were simply responding to his error; there was no 'fury' – just astonishment that someone would misrepresent work so egregiously. In fact, it's perhaps worth excavating this situation in some more detail to get a sense of the rhetorical tack that TLM takes and that is repeated throughout BE15.

Page 93 of TLM provides the following statement, which the debate on Evans' Facebook page centred around: "Chomsky famously proposed a Universal Grammar, which he dubs 'a general principle of linguistic structure on the basis of observation of a single language': English". TLM gives a reference for this claim, (page 48 of Chomsky, 1980), but when one follows up the reference (as David Pesetsky did), it turns out that Evans' statement profoundly misrepresents what Chomsky wrote. First, Chomsky did not propose "a Universal Grammar, which he dubs 'a general principle of linguistic structure'", and he certainly didn't propose a Universal Grammar on the basis of observation of a single language, English. In fact, that passage, as can be checked by simply reading it, is about the legitimacy of inferring the existence of general principles of linguistic structure on the basis of one language, and Chomsky points out that any such inference is non-demonstrative and needs to be tested by looking at other languages (Chomsky gives an example of how languages vary in their capacity to stack relative clauses, comparing English and Japanese on page 48–49, and concluding that an inference leading to a principle barring such stacking for non-restrictive relative clauses would not be legitimate because the cross-linguistic data do not support it – the opposite of what TLM claims he says).

By misusing the quotation from Chomsky, TLM created a caricature of the actual position that generative grammar takes, which it then proceeded to criticise. This is what happens throughout TLM: time and time again, incorrect claims about generative grammar are made, and when they are backed up, they are backed up by misuse of quotations. What is criticised is not the generative position, it's a chimaera invented to allow TLM to make an attack.

In fact, BE15 itself repeats this device of misused quotation in Chomsky's 'confession'. BE15 states the following: "Chomsky himself confessed that his linguistics rests on an ontological foundation that forces us to 'accept things that we know don't make any sense' (Chomsky, 2012:91)". But if one reads the passage, Chomsky is in fact discussing Nelson Goodman's nominalism (that is, the notion that there are no distinctions of individuals without distinctions of content, from which it follows that there are no abstract constructed classes like sets). In the full quote, what we find is: "But I came to the conclusion that it's [i.e. a nominalist view without sets, DA] either premature or hopeless, and if we want a productive theory-constructive [effort], we're going to have to relax our stringent criteria and accept things that we know don't make any sense, and hope that some day somebody will make some sense of them – like sets". This is a discussion of whether one should accept a nominalist metaphysics, and Chomsky is just saying he thinks that, currently at least, we should

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/935341>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/935341>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)