



Time for a sea-change in linguistics: Response to comments on ‘The Myth of Language Universals’

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the language sciences are on the brink of major changes in primary data, methods and theory. Reactions to ‘The myth of language universals’ (Evans and Levinson, 2009a,b) divide in response to these new challenges. Chomskyan-inspired ‘C-linguists’ defend a status quo, based on intuitive data and disparate universalizing abstract frameworks, reflecting 30 years of changing models. Linguists driven by interests in richer data and linguistic diversity, ‘D-linguists’, though more responsive to the new developments, have tended to lack an integrating framework. Here we outline such an integrative framework of the kind we were presupposing in ‘Myth’, namely a coevolutionary model of the interaction between mind and cultural linguistic traditions which puts variation central at all levels – a model that offers the right kind of response to the new challenges. In doing so we traverse the fundamental questions raised by the commentary in this special issue: What constitutes the data, what is the place of formal representations, how should linguistic comparison be done, what counts as explanation, what is the source of design in language?

Radical changes in data, methods and theory are upon us. The future of the discipline will depend on responses to these changes: either the field turns in on itself and atrophies, or it modernizes, and tries to capitalize on the way language lies at the intersection of all the disciplines interested in human nature.

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1. The general issues

This special issue replays many of the quarrels that have bedeviled the discipline over the last fifty years. Most of these disputes are undignified and ill-informed, and do not serve the discipline well (see e.g. Newmeyer, 1983, 1999, 2005). Nevertheless, there is much at stake – in particular the hearts and minds of young scholars whom we hope will advance linguistics. The new generation have excellent instincts for changes in the academic landscape, and they will look for fresh approaches with a clear sense of mission. Discussions of the sort in this special issue are not the place then to make cheap debating points. We all have a sense of a tipping point in the language sciences, and the question is: What is the way forward?

We believe that linguistics is on the brink of major changes in data, methods and theory. This was the message we tried to get across in the BBS paper and perhaps especially in our response to the 23 earlier comments in BBS – a response, we suspect, that many of the commentators here have failed to study.

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In the response here we try to locate the central issues in this collection of eighteen further responses to our BBS paper. As before, about half are pro and half are con. Here, drawing support from the pros we try to sharpen our own position, while focussing on the cons, to see exactly where the fault lines lie. The issues matter enormously to a discipline which, if it makes the right moves, can regain its centrality as the study of what makes us human, thus linking the humanities, the social sciences and biology in a way that will guarantee its long-term disciplinary success.

The cons are (as with the first round of responses in BBS) universally from the Chomskyan wing of the generative movement – theorists in e.g. LFG and RRG are not hostile to our line of thinking. However, the critics do not form a united front. Chomskyan theory has moved considerably in the last thirty years, through a series of different models each with their virtues but also with a series of unreconciled different notions of Universal Grammar. Many scholars still operate in the P&P model of the 1980s, not the SMT of the 2000s. Consequently, what one generative commentator will attack, another will defend – indeed it would be easy to show how they effectively shoot each other (see in these comments the variable status of notions like ‘subject’, ‘parameters’ or ‘UG’). But our purpose here is more serious: it is to try to understand what really divides us.

One issue needs to be resolved before proceeding. Recollect that the BBS article’s prime function was to draw the attention of cognitive scientists to the sheer diversity of languages, a fact that has been obscured to the outside world by the very terminology of the Chomskyan tradition (Universal Grammar in particular). The degree of interest in our paper outside linguistics shows that we were right in thinking this diversity constituted news for many cognitive scientists (see e.g. [Kenneally, 2010](#)). As mentioned, the opposition to the programme we sketched belongs almost entirely to the Chomskyan camp. It is not, as [the editors](#)¹ presume, a quarrel between generativists in the broad sense (inclusive of LFG, RRG, etc.) and the rest. Rather, it is a rift between those linguistic approaches that put linguistic diversity central (which includes LFG, RRG, descriptivists, functionalists and typologists) and those that treat diversity as a distraction from the main enterprise (as in the SMT, most clearly stated in [Chomsky, 2010](#)). Now this division between the Chomskians, whom we will call the C-linguists (think of universal Constituency as a mnemonic), and the rest, may seem to leave a motley crew as the residue. But this crew, whom we will refer to as the D-linguists, do subscribe to a number of essential tenets: their theories are Diversity-driven in the sense that they centrally aim to encompass variation, they are Data-driven and more surfacey (and thus more falsifiable) than those of the C-linguists, and they are Darwinian, in the sense that they are interested in variation at every level and the historical and cognitive processes involved in generating and limiting diversity. The great divide then is between the C-Linguists and the D-linguists, and we’ll use these labels as a shorthand in what follows.

Here is what we think are the central issues that divide the two approaches:

- (1) **The nature of linguistic data:** C-linguists draw on a very small subset of the data – especially, intuitions about complex clauses. Meanwhile the available data types (corpora, typological databases, multimedia records), and the range of data over the languages of the world, has vastly increased in recent years, as has the scientific treatment of grammatical intuitions.
- (2) **Models and Theory:** C-linguists presume, on the basis of strong universal assumptions, that the structural analysis of one language can be imported directly into the analysis of another. D-linguists prefer Boasian ‘methodological relativism’ – first analyze a language in its own terms, then compare. C-linguists equate the metalanguage used in the study of one language with the metalanguage required for comparison across languages, D-linguists don’t.
- (3) **UG:** C-linguists presume an innate set of principles exclusive to language, D-linguists are at best agnostic. Consequently C-linguists are interested in internal, structure-based explanations, which often seem circular to outsiders, while D-linguists are more attracted to explanations that invoke functional, ‘performance’ factors, and historical development. Déjà vu and rehash? Indeed, so far, there is nothing new here that has not been discussed in earlier commentaries on the linguistic camps (see e.g. [Newmeyer, 1998, 2005](#)). But the external intellectual landscape has in recent years fundamentally changed, radically shifting the balance in ways that the C-linguists do not seem to grasp. The new elements are:
- (4) **the vastly increased quantity, quality and types of data** now available to the descriptive and comparative linguist, as will be elaborated below.
- (5) **New methods**, drawing on the biological and statistical sciences, which allow us to see pattern in masses of material drawn partly from older scholarship and partly from the new databases. In addition, new computer power makes possible the modelling of language evolution and language change in increasingly realistic ways. It also allows us to model the effects of cognitive factors on these processes, in close connection to data from real human performance in the lab.
- (6) In particular, new models of **culture-biology coevolution** allow us to explore how much design must be in the organism and how much design can evolve on purely cultural grounds. Appreciating the power of cultural evolution to produce elaborate design without a designer is crucial to understanding how to apportion pattern between biology and history. It also explains why language generalizations are always statistical in character, since the distribution of attested structural types across the design space reflects the likelihoods of the evolutionary pathways that would engender them, rather than specific constraints on the structures themselves.

¹ **Boldface** indicates the author of a commentary in this issue; the full citation will be found in the References under that name (here Editors).

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