

Generative Syntax in the Twenty-First Century: The Road Ahead, Athens 5/2015

Short statement, Jason Merchant, University of Chicago

- 1B:** We can stop tying our analytical proposals to old debates about Universal Grammar, innateness, and learnability, and stop even paying lip service to positions in these debates. These are independent issues, orthogonal to the central theoretical issues we face, and a wonderful red herring for those who would seek to ignore or dismiss all generative syntax work. One can argue for or against UG as a theory of the language faculty, but it makes no difference to whether our proposals about selection, agreement, movement, phrase structure, etc. are right. We should make this clear, and defuse irrelevant objections before they begin. Someone doing Categorical Grammar or HPSG or even Construction Grammar could be a nativist, or not. Likewise for Minimalists.
- 2A:** What is our ontology? What objects are there? What features are there, what values do they range over, what are the basic operations or combinatoric statements? How does selection work?
- 2B:** Generative or formal linguistics (to distinguish all such work in the broadest sense from traditional descriptive grammars, surface-based typological work, and various other nonformal descriptive research traditions) is responsible for almost all of the major discoveries in the 20th century. Many of these are subcases of the larger discovery: grammatical relations are **local** in their own domain. This holds for targets and controllers of agreement, for case assignment, concord, A-movement (valence/argument-changing dependencies), A'-movement ('unbounded' dependencies, only seemingly unbounded), head-movement, and even vowel harmony (and other assimilatory and dissimilatory processes, sandhi, etc.) There is no real 'action at a distance'.
- 3A:** One success story in the syntax/semantics interface is the better understanding on both sides of the domain of application: syntax doesn't need to invent things like "theta-roles" because all the of the data that "theta-roles" were supposed to handle are in fact easily accounted for with a decently worked out semantics. Likewise for quantificational scope and binding constraints, "vehicle change" and other magic elixirs: let the semanticists deal with them.
- 3B:** The main bottleneck in working with psycholinguistic methods is that it is very difficult to instrumentalize many of our proposals. Even relatively simple questions (is there structure there? if so, how much and what kind?) are hard to recast in terms that lend themselves to useful investigation using reaction or reading times, ERP, or imaging experiments.
- 4A:** We need to agree on how phrase markers are formed and how the terminals map to strings (that is, we need explicit theories of linearization that are both clear, workable, and lead to plausible analyses of inter- and cross-linguistic variation in word orders; the LCA doesn't qualify). We need to be able to teach undergraduates a syntactic theory that is responsible but also fully formed: students must be able to write lexical entries, give full and complete derivations of phrase markers, understand what strings are generated by those phrase markers.