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One way in which the landscape of generative linguistics has changed is a relative decrease in the 'market share' of theoretical syntax within the field. Within syntax there is a greater role for the interfaces in the explanation of observed patterns. Since we 'see' syntactic structure only through the pairings of morphophonological form and meaning, theories of these components are central to the endeavour. Evaluating theories of grammatical knowledge requires not only specification of possible 'syntactic' representations but these must also be couched in an overall framework of how syntactic representations are connected to other representations of form and meaning, as well as the 'external' connections (how these are acquired etc). Core properties, such as cyclicity, (domains, compositionality) and competition (economy, Gricean/elsewhere interaction, etc.) seem to span the modules of grammar, in ways that asking about the details of a property in one component may shed light on the next. For example, locality of interactions within words may have promising things to say about the theory of locality at higher levels, or vice versa. From this perspective, a trend towards an increased specialization and insularity in at least some corners of the field seems to present a particular challenge to progress.

It also seems to me that we face, within syntax, the ever present tension between description and explanation — the near truism that the more we can describe, the less we can explain, and vice versa. I see this tension as having been generally healthy and productive, setting aside some apparent entrenchment at the poles. The field seems to me to be strong when we embrace this tug of war, and weak where polemical views that disparage the other half of the equation hold sway. Some measure of progress can be made on one side at the expense of the other, in temporarily setting aside recalcitrant data for example, or in making theoretical progress on incomplete data. But elegance, parsimony, or conceptual considerations get us only so far. Ultimately, our theories of possible grammars are answerable to empirical observation – the actually attested grammars set limiting conditions on the reductionist goal of explanation.

Set against this, I wonder if some of the pressure towards insularity comes from an unrealistic expectation of novelty, perhaps held over from the wide-open landscape of the early days of the field, which exacerbates the widely recognized institutional bias in scientific scholarship towards grand claims or sweeping generalizations over incremental advancement. 50 years of progress in the field has left us with a much larger base of accumulated knowledge against which novelty must be judged, while expectations for the scope of claims any particular paper will make have, if anything, increased.

Another facet of the general challenge of connecting theorizing to observation is the perennial issue of gradience. Although we work with contrastive, rather than absolute, judgments, the early 1990s marked a shift in theoretical perspective to theories that are absolute in their characterization: a derivation crashes or succeeds, there are no mere fender-benders. As an idealization, this may have been a useful move, but I see this as a looming issue which comes up both internal to the development of the theories, but perhaps even more strongly in our prospects for external engagement.