

Generative Syntax in the Twenty-First Century: The Road Ahead

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I cannot speak to themes 1A,B or 2A,B or 3A. But 3B fits me well, and I will try to contribute to 4B.

3B “What are the main success stories and bottlenecks in the interaction between syntax and the experimental subdisciplines (language acquisition, sentence processing, neurolinguistics), and how can syntax be more useful to those?”

There is an urgent need to address the question of whether and how a linguistic theory can participate in the modeling of syntactic processing and learning. If it can, how? If it cannot, why not? Is that inevitable? Could competence and performance have evolved quite separately, by sheer happenstance? Or is the apparent incompatibility between them a sign, as some have argued, that the linguistic theory must be wrong? Alternatively, if we're convinced that the linguistic theory is right, how should psycholinguistics proceed? Would theoretical linguists be content if the psycholinguistics community simply ignored their grammars, their derivational analyses?

Sentence processing research is positively thriving at present. But this is almost entirely because over the years it has discovered ways to skirt this issue which has them stymied: the almost complete blank on how syntactic knowledge, as the prevailing linguistic theory portrays it, could be mentally represented and applied in on-line processing. They have made friends with syntax by studying the *syntactic phenomena* that linguists have uncovered (accuracy and time course of processing wh-movement, island constraints, parasitic gaps, ellipsis constructions...). *Procedural* questions can also be addressed without linguists' help (serial vs parallel processing, anticipation of up-coming structure, the role of working memory capacity...).

This deeply unresolved stand-off with regard to sentence processing (both parsing and production) has equally serious ramifications for language acquisition. Current models of syntactic parameter setting lean more and more on the sentence parsing mechanism as the driving force for triggering parameter values. I will sketch the 'learning by parsing' approach that has emerged from our research at CUNY, and will explain its many merits compared with both Chomsky's early 'switch-setting' metaphor, and the subsequent shift toward trial-and-error procedures, from the Triggering Learning Algorithm of Gibson & Wexler, to Yang's Variational Learner. Even parametric defaults may turn out to be familiar parsing defaults (Minimal Attachment, Minimal Chain, etc.), further minimizing the innate underpinnings of acquisition.

But if we lack a coherent model of how abstract syntactic knowledge is deployed in sentence processing, then we lack the necessary anchor for this productive new approach to syntax acquisition. Both of the major branches of psycholinguistics are thus at risk – in limbo together. Please let's discuss in Athens: how far can theoretical linguistics bend, in order to participate in a unified theory of human language? For instance: a (very) few syntacticians of the TG-Minimalist persuasion have been exploring ways of re-thinking Merge-driven bottom-up sentence derivations so that they proceed equally well or better in top-down mode and from left to right.

The competitors in the wings for psycholinguists' allegiance are of course the various non-transformational syntactic theories, mostly monostratal, often enrichments of one kind or another of context free grammars, which demonstrably do lend themselves to efficient assignment of structure to word strings, as evidenced by practical successes in parsing The Wall Street Journal and other corpora. So I hope that as part of taking stock of generative syntax and its future, this group will elucidate and even perhaps reconsider the importance of a strongly derivational approach to sentence structure generation.

4B "In which directions would you like to see the field proceed, and where would you like the field to be in ten or twenty years' time?"

Answer: Unified. There is competence and there is performance, but they surely must interlock productively, and we must explain how.