

1. Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths:

We now have a clear set of established mid-level properties of human language, and a clear set of established tests.

We have a greatly expanded data set coming from increased investigation into understudied languages.

Issues:

The decreasing coherence of the field identified in the meeting description indeed is a real and difficult problem. It is in fact exacerbated by progress in the field, in that with an increasingly large body of knowledge comes increasing specialization.

The tension between descriptive and evolutionary adequacy, and between explanatory and evolutionary adequacy is a significant issue. I see this playing out in a splintering into different types of research; I highlight three different types, while noting that certainly not all syntactic work falls into these types. I have undertaken all three, and all three are tackling necessary goals.

(i) Research (sometimes falling under the term “biolinguistics”) that takes the evolutionary adequacy goal as primary, and tries to create the simplest possible theory. The weakness of this type of work is its often tenuous connection to actual complex language data. (It’s remarkable how quickly a descriptively adequate theory needs more than merge.)

(ii) Research that takes the descriptive adequacy goal as primary, and for example, analyses a complex data set from an understudied language. This type of work has the tendency to add options to universal grammar, thus moving away from the goals of evolutionary adequacy and explanatory adequacy. (It’s remarkable how quickly a descriptively adequate theory needs more than merge.)

(iii) Work that takes the explanatory adequacy goal as primary. Our understanding of syntactic acquisition has made great progress in the early 21st century. It is now clear, however, that speculations regarding explanatory adequacy made in the context of a syntax paper are not fruitful. To properly evaluate the ramifications of a syntactic proposal for learnability, we need to know not only the (proposed) syntactic analysis of the adult language, and the hypothesis space of the child, but also the nature and amount of input to the child, the errors made by the child, and the time course of acquisition. In other words, we need a separate paper on acquisition. Furthermore, for many languages (especially understudied), the data needed for the acquisition paper is not available.

To make progress, though, the field cannot split into subfields that addresses each goal independently. We need a unified theory addressing all the goals.

Furthermore, while the field has many excellent practitioners in the younger generations, few students seem to have internalized the foundational goals of the field.

See also 4.

2. Central unresolved theoretical issues

What motivates movement?

What is the ontology of syntactic features?

How many projections are there?

How are islands explained?

What is the general theory of binding (especially anaphors and pronouns) that is crosslinguistically valid?

How is the distribution of overt DPs versus PRO explained cross linguistically?

3. Syntax in relation to other fields of linguistic inquiry

A major challenge is in the relationship between syntax and morphology. (This is not helped by the splintered state of morphology itself.) For example, what is the relationship between the syntactic Agree operation and morphological agreement? What is the relationship between the syntactic Agree operation, syntactic licensing, and morphological case?

4. The road ahead

We have an image problem.

Outside of linguistics, the public does not understand Chomskyan universals, does not understand the claim of Universal Grammar, does not understand the notion of recursion. We typically attempt to explain using movement constraints in English as an example, but this leaves us open to the attack that we are making claims about human language based on only English. It may be useful to collect examples from as many languages as possible for certain Chomskyan universals and make this publicly available. (Wikipedia? Their page on linguistic universals is almost exclusively Greenbergian.)

We must also continue to reply to anti-linguistic work (see e.g. generative replies to Evans & Levinson 2009 in BBS; Dunbar, Kush, Hornstein, Adger's Reddit post on Vyvyan Evans; Norbert Hornstein's blog Facultyoflanguage), and to create materials designed for the public audience (e.g. Steve Anderson's page on the Linguistic Society of America "How Many Languages are there in the World?", David Adger's (2015) WIREs Cognitive Science article; my Knowledge by the Slice talk "Mapping the Boundaries of Human Language"; Raffaella Zanuttini's Pacific Standard articles; etc).

Within linguistics, Chomskyan syntacticians have a reputation of being English-centric and failing to pay sufficient attention to the properties of lesser-studied languages. This is happily an area of significant growth in generative syntax, a trend that I expect to only accelerate. On the one hand, we must be vigilant to ensure that our work in these areas is indeed of the highest quality in description as well as in theory. We must resist the short-cuts, relying not just on quoting a few sentences from a second-hand source, but confirming as much as

possible with additional sources, ideally additional native speakers, but at least grammars and typological/descriptive work. (If I see another quotation of Dyirbal data from Dixon 1994, that doesn't bother with Dixon 1972, I can't be responsible for my actions!)

On the other hand, we must continue to correct the anti-generative work that misrepresents lesser-studied language data (e.g. see Legate, Pesetsky, & Yang's response to Levinson 2013 in *Language*).

I am happy with the growth I see on understudied languages. As we have seen with more well-studied languages, it can take decades and often the contribution of multiple linguists before we hammer out the basic facts that have theoretical consequence found in a language (family). I would like for more languages (language families) to reach that state of understanding.

I would like to see more in-depth research crossing language-family boundaries (other than X and English!).

See also 1.