

The future of generative syntax

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Before I answer the questions posed by the organizers, let me precede that by stating from the outset that we should be talking about the future of syntax, not just generative syntax, the future of linguistic theory, not just syntactic theory, and the future of our field. Although we all have our favorite domains on linguistic inquiry and linguistic structure, our discussion is only going to be helpful if we recognize how to push ourselves and get out of our comfort zone.

1. Strengths and Weaknesses

A. What have been the main strengths of generative syntactic research, with particular emphasis on the early 21st century, and what do you think is wrong with the field of Generative syntax today?

In my opinion, the main strengths have been threefold. First, we have learned to recognize the range of variation in natural language and to appreciate that range of variation. This applies to both languages and populations. In particular, the concept of an idealized monolingual linguist-speaker is no longer the platonic ideal of our field; instead, we have learned to appreciate that languages and speakers are messy and complicated, but we stand to learn from that complexity. Related to that is the second strength, which at first blush may seem almost antonymic to the first: we have come to understand that the seeming variation across languages is more constrained than it may appear. On a more general level, our analysis demonstrates that quite often, subtle facts need to be investigated to determine the syntax of the world's languages. Sometimes surface cues suggest extraordinary patterns or phenomena, when there really are none. The third strength has to do with the development of the analytical and diagnostic tools at our disposal; these tools can be deployed to investigate new phenomena and to predict what is possible without necessarily looking all over the globe to find something exotic.

In parallel to the above strengths, I believe there are some weaknesses. Two in particular come to mind. The first has to do with the development of almost religious articles of faith in the field, often based on sociology of referential groups rather than genuine information. If someone belongs to school X (read "cult X"), people from school Y treat them as suspect and generally tend to underestimate the value of what that person may say. Suspicion abounds and people from different school/cults/neighborhoods rarely venture across the train tracks to go to the other side. The second issue I would like to discuss has to do with the role of experimental evidence in linguistic theory construction. Experimental approaches to language have gained great traction lately but it is very hard to name at least one theoretical issue that was conceded or revised in light of experimental evidence. If things continue this way, we stand the risk of finding ourselves in an even more fractured field, where theoretical linguists sit on one side of the table, at most smiling politely at the experimentalists at the other side of the table (or in a different room).

B. How do you think the field could/should go about addressing the current problems?

The way ahead which I can see is for researchers with diverse interests to interact with each other via graduate student projects which take us out of our comfort zone. It is hard for established researchers to change their ways, but working on new(er) issues vicariously, through dissertations, may be a way for us to become more flexible.

2. Central unresolved theoretical issues

A. What are the major open questions in the field of generative syntax today?

- I. *The role of prosody in syntax and outside syntax.* We no longer perceive language as something we write in our papers or notes—it is finally taken for what it is, spoken or signed in real time. That means that prosody and syntax need to connect and arrive at a division of labor. Putting all the prosody in (narrow) syntax seems excessive and imperialistic, and putting all of it into PF is defeatist. There must be a middle way. We have not figured it out, though.
- II. *The status of morphology.* Is morphology a level, on par with syntax, or is it an interface? We have reasonable working theories of morphology, some of which are quite sophisticated, for example, DM, but how much of such theories is in fact needed?

B. What is or ought (not) to be in the field's theoretical core?

What ought to be in the field's theoretical core? Constituency, categorization, selection, licensing, displacement operations. I am yet to be convinced that bare phrase structure is the way to go, but that may be due to my personal suspicions and dissatisfaction with new approaches such as labeling.

What ought not to be in the field's theoretical core? Binding, scope, quantification. These are semantic notions.

3. Syntax in relation to other fields of linguistic inquiry

A. What are the main success stories and bottlenecks in the interaction between syntax and other core-theoretical sub-disciplines (semantics, phonology, morphology)?

Syntax and semantics work reasonably well together, but there does not seem to be an a priori metric which would allow us to determine the appropriate ratio of syntax to semantics. I remember working with a semanticist (Ivano Caponigro) on a language where all embeddings look like relative clauses. I could have made the syntax very

complex and gotten that convoluted syntax to account for the data, but I opted for the least complicated syntax, and it turned out that we needed very little tweaking in semantics to make things work. I learned a great deal in that process—not only about semantics but also about fighting my own proclivities to complicate things. Still, the choice between creating a more or less complicated level of analysis is often a matter of taste or esthetics. Without a good metric of how to apportion syntax and semantics we are destined to meander in many unnecessary ways.

B. What are the main success stories and bottlenecks in the interaction between syntax and the experimental sub-disciplines (language acquisition, sentence processing and neurolinguistics), and how can syntax be more useful to those?

First, syntacticians need to learn to speak to psychologists and cognitive scientists so that those audiences will not be scared away by jargon. We like talking to each other but we need to find better ways to make ourselves understood outside our narrow field. When the paper by Evans and Levinson (“The myth of language universals”) came out, I was struck how many commentaries, penned by psycholinguists and psychologists, endorsed it—primarily because it seemed to give these specialists a license to ignore syntax. It is not enough to recognize that we know and can explain interesting things about natural language. We cannot sit there and wait for people who have labs to run and grants to apply for to come to us asking for advice. It is time to take our advice to them.

Second (and related to the first point), we need to make ourselves useful by telling psychologists and cognitive scientists what is of interest in language. No linguist needs experiment number 87 showing that there are processing differences between nouns and verbs. But we do need experiments showing that there are subclasses in English unaccusatives or unergatives. If there are two types of comparatives, phrasal and clausal, and there is no telling the two analyses apart for language X, maybe acquisitionists, cognitive scientists, or psycholinguists could tell us which analysis is superior. And if semanticists and syntacticians posit an extra functional head, such as Voice, which licenses an external argument in transitive clauses, it would be helpful for them to worry whether there may be non-primary evidence for such a head, let’s say from processing, acquisition, or code-switching. Each of us can only do so much but if we took it upon ourselves to engage in a conversation with at least one psychologist or cognitive scientist on a regular basis, it would help us promote our field.

Third, current discussions about biological foundations of linguistics and issues of evolution of language strike me more as part wishful thinking, part promissory notes. It would be good to make some progress on that front, but in order to do that we need a more serious conversation with evolutionary biologists and geneticists. We have to make up our minds as to what the features are that we think of as crucial in evolution and bring those to the table in our discussion with people from outer fields.