

Ian Roberts (University of Cambridge)

## 1 STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

A ‘What have been the main strengths of generative-syntactic research, with particular emphasis on the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and what do you think is wrong with the field of generative syntax today?’

The main strength is undoubtedly the range of high-level cross-linguistic work being done. The range of languages covered by generative grammarians is by now very extensive indeed, and, in principle, quite broad typological generalizations are possible. This is also true of diachronic syntax, a field which scarcely existed prior to 1979 and which now forms a lively sub-community within the wider community.

However – and here comes a weakness – there is a disconnect between theory and description. A great deal of theoretical work makes no empirical proposals at all and sometimes, beyond seeing what can’t be said using a new theoretical vocabulary, it’s hard to see what the empirical consequences are. There’s nothing wrong with purely theoretical work whose goals are simply not empirical, but the connection between the strands is often lost sight of. Conversely a great deal of very good comparative work is really descriptive in nature, using theoretical ideas purely as analytical tools. Again, there’s nothing wrong with this in itself, but the trend has become too dominant. In particular, too little attention is paid to the mechanism of cross-linguistic variation (the theory of parameters, or whatever might correspond to, or replace, that) in comparative work, too little attention is paid to the kind of higher-order typological questions that our data and theory now permit us to address and, in diachronic work, too little attention is paid to mechanisms of change. The question of the relation between synchronic variation and diachronic change is also hardly ever addressed, and this is something we are in a position to say interesting new things about.

What’s missing in recent times is work of the kind that characterised the early GB period, when the discovery of new empirical materials went hand in hand with the development of the theory (Rizzi 1982, 1986, Huang 1982, Saito 1985, etc.).

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

I don’t really know. I think one can only lead by example, or try to. One very good example of how our theory can be used to say interesting things about variation and change while at the same time moving the theory forward is the work on parametric comparison by Longobardi and his associates. This work may eventually shed new light on venerable questions in historical linguistics (the first-order grouping of the Indo-European languages, possible distant genetic relations going beyond the time-depth of Indo-European, etc.), and people from outside our community (e.g. Paul Heggarty, Don Ringe) are paying attention.

## 2 CENTRAL UNRESOLVED THEORETICAL ISSUES

A ‘What are the major open questions in the theory of generative syntax today?’

Core areas which we thought we understood in the 80s: “ECP” phenomena, binding theory.

New areas opened up by recent(ish) theoretical ideas: the relationship between Phase Impenetrability and other forms of locality (relativised minimality/shortest move); what are the theoretical underpinnings of the descriptively excellent cartographic work? More generally, what is the intensional characterisation of the set of formal features the syntax can use?

Long-standing conundrums: the proper characterisation of the A/A’-distinction? What is *do*-support? *Tough*-movement, infinitival relatives, etc.

B ‘What is or ought (not) to be in the field’s common theoretical core?’

I don’t think you can make normative (“ought”) statements about scientific theories. *Ought* the universe to be made of string (or whatever it is string theory says)? Whatever seems to give us a reasonable answer to our central questions, which remain those defined by Chomsky as explanatory adequacy and “beyond”.

## 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 the other core-theoretical subdisciplines (semantics, phonology, morphology)?’

In recent years syntax and semantics have become closer and, certainly on a descriptive level, we have a good understanding of that interface across a range of questions. Core theoretical questions remain open though, concerning the reality of models for interpretation, Chomsky’s scepticism about reference (which can be extended to truth), the status of type theory. In semantic theory we have a range of excellent analytical tools, whose validity is not in doubt on one level, but they are not fully integrated into an overall conception of the nature of the language faculty in the way that, say, Merge and Agree are.

The connections between (mainstream) generative syntax and distributed morphology are well-studied, and this has been an area where real progress has been and is being made.

There’s a disconnect with phonological theory, especially Optimality Theory, which strikes me as profoundly incompatible with minimalism on a conceptual level. There is depressingly little dialogue between syntacticians and phonologists these days.

B ‘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?’

Mainstream cognitive science has almost completely given up on us over the past twenty years (see Boden 2007, Chapter 9). This is an extremely worrying development. Part of the reason for this is methodology: our intuition-based generalisations are simply inadmissible to most researchers in other areas of cognitive science. Furthermore, our theoretical speculations seem too far removed from data to the other communities. These two things combine to give us a bad

reputation. I think if we had some really strong, empirically based results (concerning broad typological generalisations, for example) maybe things could change; again, Longobardi may be leading the way here. But we're going to have to work very hard and any future rapprochement isn't going to come from the other side.

#### **4 THE ROAD AHEAD**

A 'What do you see as the biggest challenges for generative-syntactic research in the coming years/decades?'

Maintaining our institutional status given our intellectual isolation.

B 'In which direction(s) would you like to see the field proceed, and where would you like the field to be in ten or twenty years' time?'

We have to play to our strengths. Our greatest strength, and perhaps ultimately Chomsky's greatest legacy, is that we really have a clear idea of what we're trying to do (explanatory adequacy and beyond), and, in syntax, we have a pretty good idea of the analytical tools we need in order to do it (not so in semantics or phonology, I suspect, in part for reasons given above). We also have great empirical knowledge. We need to bring theory and description closer together again, so that we obtain major empirical results as we elaborate the theory. Once more, Longobardi is setting a very good example.