

Strengths and weaknesses and the areas for focus
Peter Sells, 19 April 2015

Clearly generative grammar has been very successful, and we now have highly detailed studies and understandings of many languages, in ways that were not imagined even before the 1980s, I would say. We know what to look for. We are able to impute precise properties to a given phenomenon or construction in a given language, and relate that to other phenomena in the language. This is a level of grammatical analysis that transcends what was accomplished in preceding eras. We also have many specific true “results”. As a very specific instance, we know that ‘why’ has a syntax different from every other wh-word or -phrase, in language after language.

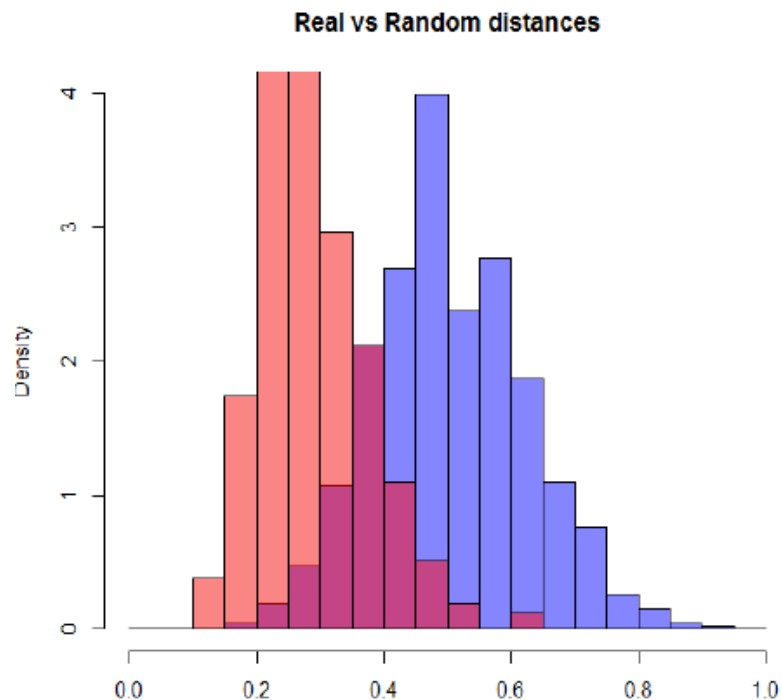
The direction that Chomsky has taken in the last 20 years, pushing more and more for explanatory adequacy (or beyond!), with less of a regard for descriptive adequacy, does not seem to have yielded much benefit for the field. This move towards higher abstraction has come ironically at the same when we have seen massive and comparative micro-parametric surveys of countries, language families, or large geographical areas (see point 3 below).

Chomsky has, perhaps rightly enough for someone in his position, pushed the view that generative linguists should focus on I-language, and that any research taking E-language as the object of study will necessarily be superficial and taxonomic. He has also presented the view of the 3 factors that contribute to an individual’s linguistic abilities: UG, experience, and general cognitive abilities. I think we need to get serious about sorting out the contribution of these 3 factors.

A. The object of study

I see (at least) two reasons that this is worth considering. Suppose some surface phenomenon in the syntax of a given language actually is 3rd factor – it’s clear in the primary language data and can be learned “as a pattern”, let’s say. So that is part of the grammatical knowledge of a speaker. What format is that knowledge represented in? If it’s the same format as the rest of the grammar, then the grammar has to be homogeneously accessible to 1st factor and 3rd factor principles/mechanisms. If it’s not in the same format, then ... essentially we’d be looking at a system with two different kinds of information in it. Maybe this is right: UG gives us a format for language (I’m happy to say “for grammars”), and then what the substantive content of a grammar is is deduced by general cognitive skills and primary linguistic data.

Second, though related, we have to be clear on what it is we are trying to account for. Imagine that, based on theoretically sophisticated study of actual language patterns (E-language), we can propose a significant number of parameters of variation. In the work of Longobardi and colleagues, it is proposed that the distribution of languages calculated in terms of distances from each other is not simply a normal distribution generated out of these parameters. Rather actual languages are skewed to bunch together more, and be closer in distance.



The distribution of actual languages is the pink part; a normal distribution generated out of parameters is the blue part. So, we need to explain this difference. There could be 3 explanations:

1. It's a matter of history. Language started out a certain way and over 50,000 years or however long it has been, only certain paths of change have emerged.
2. It's all 3rd factor. I think we need to show, or at least be reasonably sure, that this distribution could not be explained by our general cognitive abilities. (Very few of Chomsky's original arguments for the need for UG from the 1950s and 1960s hold now.)
3. (What we want.) Without 1st factor principle, the distribution of languages based purely on observed parameters would be like the blue area. UG principles constrain the space of language variation. So we need to know all about as much data as we can comprehend, and what we can't explain by 3rd factor knowledge and principles.

B. Hindrances to progress

Some aspects of the minimalist program have not helped the progress of syntax or its coherence as a field. One is the move further and further away from representation to pure derivation. In a very practical sense this makes it hard to "see" an analysis, or to compare analyses. Another is the concept of phase, which does not seem to have contributed anything. We have discovered very little new over the last 20 years, and many important aspects of syntax remain in their pre-minimalist incarnations.

Phases do not seem to have spurred discovery in the way that many of the original modules of GB did. Really, phases don't correspond to domains which appear to emerge

naturally in syntactic analysis. They don't correspond to islands, they don't correspond to natural cyclic domains (maybe those domains are only CP and DP). Anything that refers to a domain, rather than a relationship, has been stalled in the minimalist era. Suppose there is some phenomenon which is described by an old-fashioned "clause-mate constraint". There appears to be no way to even state such a constraint in minimalist syntax. Relatedly, there has not been much progress in binding theory over 20+ years now. As far as I know, our understanding of the facts and what properties are referred to has increased greatly, but the basic content of binding theory remains more or less the same.

The relevant underlying property here seems to be one of being able to make reference to a domain or stretch of structure within a representation. As minimalism has moved further and further to pure derivation, this has left us nothing to refer to in a more holistic sense.

C. A modest proposal

The basic building blocks of syntax seem to be: structures; categories, with categorial features and projections; and other syntactic features which contribute to surface form but which also make syntax "tick". We need a consistent approach to structures, categories, and features.

Even though head movement is supposedly problematic due to the extension condition, everyone acts as though head movement exists, and in fact many key results over the last 30+ years are in the domain of head movement. It's surely plausible that 3rd factor principles allow us to recognize the difference between words and phrases (lexicon vs. syntax). Taking this distinction into syntax (with a bit of UG), the syntax itself can work in terms of phrases vs. words, which then gives us phrasal movement and head movement, and probably means there is some validity to Spec-Head and Head-Complement relations.

Language variation will be described by parametric variation. As in the work of Ian Roberts and colleagues, there may be formats for parameters of different levels of detail/specificity (1st factor). Actual parameters are emergent from the data, and not pre-specified; they are how we describe differences between languages (3rd factor). Eventually, of course, we want to understand why those are the parameters.