

## Some more or less aphoristic answers and comments

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This is the list of themes as distributed earlier with my comments and suggestions inserted as a bulleted list.

### Themes for the symposia

#### 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?'

- The sense of common purpose of the 70s and early 80s is largely gone. In part this may well be due to the fact that syntax has become 'too narrow' to provide the many excellent and ambitious brains in the field sufficient space to let their brilliant ideas play around in.
- The notion of "research program" has become, at least in part, perverted. In quite a number of cases a major hypothesis is formulated and argued for in some detail or, in some cases, with at least a fair amount of anecdotal evidence. But depending on the author's standing and popularity, the research program is taken over as gospel by many in the field. To mention just one example: Kayne's antisymmetry proposal: attractive, never sufficiently worked out in detail, checks and balances suggest: failure, but adopted without argument by dozens in the field. In other cases it works more or less: cartography.
- "It's current problems" (see 1B below) suggests that we know what they are. But it looks as if we do not know what they are. The recent attempt by Hubert Haider and myself "Questions" failed, mainly due to the fact that about 150 prominent colleagues of ours were simply unable to formulate questions that they did not have the foggiest idea what the answer could be. Instead, in large majority they submitted ideas for solutions that look OK, and from which, in a kind of backformation, they constructed some questions that might be answered by these answers.

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

- It should free itself from the straightjacket called narrow syntax, from the 'core issue' of recursion, more generally from evolution-related issues. There are zillions of interesting problems and issues in non-narrow areas of syntax (and phonology and semantics) that not only deserve our attention because they are interesting puzzles with the potential of yielding surprising results, but also because after all they also can reflect deep, complex, abstract properties of the mind/brain, and, frankly, who cares if the brain we are talking about is uniquely the human brain or if similar properties are also found in other primates or even beyond.

- The largely social divides in the larger domain of linguistics are not helpful. Wherever possible we should try to bridge the gaps, between syntax and phonology, between syntax and semantics, between generativists and so-called typologists, between introspectionists and data crunchers, etc.
- An unpopular point which I nevertheless feel needs to be addressed is this. We can either ignore the many stupid, misguided, or simply fraudulent attacks from outside generative grammar proper, or we can try to fight them. On the whole, due to largely the sociology of the field at large, the power of Nature, Science etc. I think there is very little that we can do. But one (admittedly somewhat protestant) advice is to try to clean up our own act. While things are not too bad overall, there is no denying that there we frequently come across missing citations of relevant material, that problematic data or analyses are easily omitted or relegated to footnotes “left for further research”, that students in many even good departments learn syntax without learning semantics and or phonology, and vice-versa, that some theoretical or analytical wheel is regularly reinvented. There are things we can do. Good teachers with a broad knowledge of the field are worth their weight in gold. The wealth of excellent results obtained over the past, say, 60 years is now so big that no single person can be expected to have it all in his/her head. Therefore, there is a serious need for instruments that will help teachers and students find their way in the jungle and be guided to what is really important by way of facts and achievements on any specific topic. Handbooks help (though the theory changes dramatically fast, sometimes), works like the Wiley-Blackwell Companions (Syntax, Phonology, and, forthcoming, Semantics and Acquisition) help too, and large scale scientific grammars for specific languages based on the past decades of linguistic research such as the Syntax of Dutch help as well. There is a long way to go here, and the more such substantial thesaurus-type tools come on the market, the more important it will be to have them available online, in public access format if at all possible, and electronically integrated with a good and efficient system of cross-referencing and searching. Ours is a poor field, hence this is a struggle, often not only against funding agencies but also against publishers.

## 2 CENTRAL UNRESOLVED THEORETICAL ISSUES

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

- One feeling that I have quite strongly is that in a number of sectors we should rethink some fundamental tenets of the architecture and formal structure of grammar. Take something like Williams’ Representation Theory. It has not received the attention it deserves, and if it holds promise – we should make a joint attempt to substantiate it. Similarly (this is *pro domo*) the general reaction to my proposals involving grafts has been: “too powerful, too rich, etc” and as a result my work got largely ignored. But recall that when transformations were introduced, they were too powerful, too rich etc. However, the ensuing research program was probably the most dynamic and the most successful in the history of generative grammar. An initially unconstrained theory of Merge could provide the same type of challenge, perhaps the kind of challenge that we need.
- A long held dogma (by Chomsky, formulated by Halle and Bromberger) is that syntax and phonology are deeply and fundamentally different. But if UG consists of a number of powerful, abstract principles (Merge, Locality, Economy etc.) then it would be a huge

surprise to me to find that a rich and complex system like phonology would not avail itself of some of the same principles and mechanisms. Someone like Vergnaud has defended the idea of close formal similarities between syntax and phonology in all of his work. And recently, in a lecture for the Dutch Royal Academy, Chomsky darkly suggested that his own thinking may be developing in the same direction.

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

- Some of my remarks above suggest that this cannot be answered in any kind of easy way. I'll abstain for the moment.

### 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)?'

- Nothing to add to the above.

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?'

- I am afraid the biggest bottleneck is that people with a psychological, physical, medical etc. background, with whom one would want to collaborate, often look down on linguists and linguistics with profound disdain, despite their actual ignorance of our field. (In fact I have often noticed incredible prima-donna behavior on the part of our psycho- and neuro-brethren and –sisters.) There are encouraging exceptions, but we are a long way from a satisfactory collaboration on equal terms.

### 4 THE ROAD AHEAD

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

- Survival. Perhaps avoidable if we manage to bring about some of what I was dreaming of when writing my comments on 2A above.

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?'

- If the revival suggested above were to succeed, I'd be proud to be an old fart who has somehow managed to contribute a few small ideas.