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On the Notion ‘Showing Something’¹

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‘show \’sho\ *vb* ... 1: to cause or permit to be seen’
--Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary

1 An Informal Introduction

It is clear that linguists work on something that matters to *Time*'s general readership. Granted, it takes the form of 'Increase your vocabulary', 'Learn Spanish in 30 days', worrying about Jimmie's stuttering, a fascination with dialect differences, fervent feelings about the English Only issue, and so

The perspective I'm trying to take here is what we look like from the

2.2 A Terminological Issue?

To many people, the term 'linguist' is synonymous with 'polyglot', as examination of popular literature will easily show. Using the term 'lin-

2.5 Do People Really Want Their Languages Analyzed?

Unlike having dreams, desires, wishes and fears, the moment a person begins to speak, their thoughts and feelings are made public. Analysis brings a feeling of self-consciousness to this speaking process (particularly if one uses 'bad grammar' or speaks a socially identifiable dialect). This doesn't seem to bother working linguists very much, and if it did they wouldn't be linguists. But a good analogy that linguists might be able to connect better to is the study of gesture. If one has had the experience of the significance of one's gesture being pointed out publicly, often a discomfort arises which others easily feel about language.

3 Some Longer Issues

3.1 Abstractness

Many linguists do not have such difficulties of communicating what they do. If one studies second language acquisition, for instance, as a specialty within the field, the responses to 'What do you do?' are fairly accessible and understandable. Something like 'I try to understand the way people learn a new language, so that we can teach them more effectively' leaves few questions in anyone's mind. Or, if one focuses on sentence processing by employing experimental methodologies, or computational routines for text retrieval, or constructing dictionaries and any manner of things, people readily have as good an understanding of what one does for a living as they do of any physicist or anthropologist. The same goes for language specialists--people who identify themselves as an expert in Greek, Southeast Asian languages, or Tibetan, have an entirely understandable if slightly arcane place

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are no longer. Such constructs as RULES, LOGIC, GRAMMATICALITY, and many others that many linguists make use of, have come under attack and have been increasingly discarded in other areas.⁸ Linguists appear, in the eyes of some others, to be what's left on the beach after the tide went out, being unable to swim fast enough, and it is not always clear to others why linguists have not 'kept up'.

This view finds much favor among some of the closest colleagues, including a growing number within linguistics proper. The grounding assumption appears to be that linguistics is (in fact) a part of cognitive science, and if we take that seriously then it follows that we need to be serious about squaring the way linguists produce knowledge with the way knowledge is produced in other areas of cognitive science. But more often, the critique becomes one of pure theory. The criticism is, to put it simply, that linguists' distinctive methodologies and modes of explanation stop short, somehow. That's the view, and it's not confined to the late 1990's or critiques from cognitive science. Here's what it looked like to one professor offering advice to a student about how to get through the language history examinations, some fifty years ago:¹⁰

'When you hit a word in a text you cannot identify, simply correlate it with some modern word it sounds like and then invent a bridge between them. Most of the examiners will be suspicious, but may consider, so imprecise is linguistic science, your little word history an interesting possibility.'

Or, consider a commonly-encountered type of example from your Linguistics 101 class, where students have been asked to give a morphological analysis of, say, the word *ridiculous*. While the *-ous* part is pretty cut and dried, what about the *ridicul-* part? And, if it's decomposable, is it *-ic -ul*, or *i-cul*, or what? Does appeal to Latin settle the issue? Is the existence of the word *risible* or *deride* a relevancy? Wherein lies the fact of the matter? And if there is no fact of the matter, what are linguists up to?

This criticism has enough content to sting some, despite the demonstrated productivity of applying linguistic methodologies in finding out new facts about language and languages. The issue is *not* whether linguistics has produced a significant bank of knowledge about language during, say, this century (just compare what is known now to what was known a hundred

⁸ See, for just one example, Seidenberg and McDonald (1999).

⁹ Even simple quantification of judgment data would be a step in this direction. See, for instance, McCawley (1997).

¹⁰ From Delbanco (1999).

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Let's not argue the question of increased progress one way or another; let's instead consider the cost of this strategy. While one can, to a large extent, limit one's audience or who one listens to, what are considered 'normal standards of evidence' remains almost exactly the same no matter what one does. And as one's descriptive base becomes increasingly dependent upon theoretical argument and conclusion, the implicit claim that this base encodes what can be satisfactorily shown--that is, what everyone pretty much agrees on-- becomes correspondingly less and less connected to the grounding of common standards of evidence in society at large, and also less and less connected to the standards of evidence invoked across academics in general. Note that this issue does not have to do with simple specialization per se; rather, it has to do with communicating to others what the results of all this work shows. If such statements as, 'Transderivational constraints exist' or 'Binding is expressible as three conditions', or 'The sound structure of language is a series of ranked universal constraints', are regarded as what has been shown, we're going to get the hearing we deserve. What, in terms of common experience, do such statements (whether correct or not) have to do with? Losing sight of this question results in others not being able to catch sight of what linguists, as a community, regard as answers, as what is known about language.

At the same time, there is no doubt as to both the necessity and worth of developing(e)-2f77(s)s3(-t)-25-1.445ws s77sws'en7(s3(-t)11.-4[(sw)18(r)-184.6(si)-94.8(s'e2c)-6.91(er)-55..9(e)-

events in the derivative sense of order of observation, not actual order of occurrence (it's likely that in many papers some PREDICTIONS of an analysis were observed before the analysis itself was arrived at). Science also normally results, at least often enough, in some palpably engineered products that allow us to do things we couldn't do before. The point is not that linguists are unscientific (though my personal opinion is we're far more like philosophers than chemists). Rather, in asserting a scientific approach to others there is the risk of confusion because linguists don't wear white lab coats, often don't use expensive equipment and laboratories full of blinking lights and dials, the academic departments don't reside in science schools or divisions, and the scientists themselves don't appear to claim linguists in many important respects.¹⁵ So, this discussion, as one publicly presented, does not immediately meet with very much that is already familiar in the minds of the outside world, including other academics.

3.5 Ontology of the Object of Study

The object of study for all linguists is (some aspect of) language. Most, however, have underlying motivations for studying language that are derived from other or broader intellectual or social concerns. It is important to articulate these concerns; in so doing, however, it is likewise important to distinguish them from what is the object of study. Let's take an obvious example first, and here I am more or less reiterating published comments by Geoff Pullum.¹⁶ From one very common point of view, what linguistics is about is a particular endowment that human beings have by virtue of membership in a particular species, and that endowment is transmitted genetically. Thus, it is tempting to say that linguists are *really* doing genetics. Let us set aside the question of the correctness of this view--it is certainly not

and it is entirely plausible. But, as noted above, people read the job ads, and how many psychology departments are hiring linguists these days who do not share the experimental methodologies, and consequent modes of explanation, of others in such departments?

The basic claim examined is an ontological claim. That language is psychological (biological, genetic, chemical, on down the reductionist ramp). There exist competing ontological views--language as a social/cultural phenomenon is one perfectly respectable alternative, or that language is an abstract mathematically-specifiable system. There is also the (to my mind, strong) possibility that 'language' is of mixed ontology (Pullum and Scholz 1997). Regardless, my own view is that ontological claims are the very, very toughest ones of all to put through, and hardly anyone can do it successfully. Now, one can believe that in fact this or that is what linguists are up to (say, studying the mind), and it may even be true, but when this agenda takes the form of a public representation of the character of an entire field, there's confusion sown, since not all linguists would agree that 'the mind' is what is being studied. It does seem, in contrast, that all would agree linguists study (some aspect of) human language, by studying particular languages and lan-

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