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1 Language and cognition

We probably all share an interest in syntax, so we would dearly love a clear and certain answer to the question: what is syntactic structure like? Is it based on dependencies between words, or on phrases? What kinds of relation are there? And so on. But before we can answer relatively specific questions like these, we must first answer a much more general question: What kind of thing do we think language is? Or maybe: Where do we think language is – nowhere, in society, in our minds? Our answer will decide what basic assumptions we make, and how our discipline, linguistics, relates to other disciplines.

Is language a set of abstract patterns like those of mathematics, without any particular location? This is a popular answer, and makes a good deal of sense. After all, what is language if not abstract patterning? The patterns made by words in a sentence, or by segments in a syllable, are certainly abstract and regular, and can be studied as a branch of mathematics – as indeed they have been studied and still are studied in linguistics. For some researchers who take this approach, the aim is elegance and consistency: so in a competition between alternative analyses, the prize goes to the simplest one. For others, though, the goal is a working computational system, so the criterion is some kind of efficiency. One problem for this approach is that the material in which these patterns are embedded is inescapably human activity; in contrast with mathematical patterns, linguistic patterns only exist because humans create them. And another problem with the mathematical approach is that it provides few explanations for why language is as it is. If language patterns always turned out to be the most elegant possible patterns, the mathematical approach would indeed explain why; but they don't, and as we all know, language can be frustratingly messy.

Another possible answer is that language is a set of conventions that exist in society. For some

researchers, the social character of language is fundamental (the 'tabula and McGraw-Hill' view), and they like to think about language as 'constraining' communication. Language exists 'out there' in the community, as sort of a thing shared by all its members, so the methods of each language and cultural anthropologists should apply. Similarly, so the sociolinguists see the social patterning of variation as belonging to the community, though not to any of its members (Labov 1972). The trouble with this approach is that explanations are much harder to find, and much less homogeneous, than we might expect, and once again, the basic data are irreducibly individual products – individual speakers and listeners to each other.

The third answer – and the latter preferred option – is that language is an example of individual knowledge. As in the first answer, the knowledge becomes mathematically expressible patterning, and as in the second, it has a strong social dimension – after all, we learn the knowledge from others in our community, and we reveal our knowledge through our own social behaviour as speakers and listeners. Now a purely language is a matter of individual psychology. We learn it, exemplify it; we use it as individuals, and others know it, so indirectly, through it. Why could Jerry Seinfeld or the other views of language have been very influential, and still are.

As an alternative example of its influence, take the criterion of elegance or simplicity. This is very widely accepted in linguistics, and those of us who support dependency structure might argue that one of the attractions of our approach, in contrast with phrase structure, is its simplicity. Just cannot the simplest be more precisely one node per word, whereas a phrase structure analysis contains all those wild nodes, plus extra nodes for the phrases. But is this criterion really relevant? If we were physicists, it certainly