

Concordia Cognitive Science Group
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presents a lecture by

Norbert Hornstein
University of Maryland



Approaching Universals from Below

I-universals in light of a minimalist program for linguistic theory

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Concordia's Hall Building, H-1220
1455 de Maisonneuve W.
info: reiss@alcor.concordia.ca

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Plato's Problem...Primary Linguistic Data...Darwin's Problem...Universal Grammar...

ABSTRACT

From the earliest days of generative grammar, the object of study has been the Faculty of Language (FL): those aspect of the mind/brain that underlies the fast, uniform and seemingly effortless ability that humans have to acquire a natural language when placed in a linguistic environment, however rudimentary (sometimes, radically so, as in the case of language creation/creolization). The supposition that such a capacity exists and is part of human nature (perhaps uniquely so) rests on the trivial observation that humans are to language what birds are to flight and fish are to water; viz. that (barring pathology) any human child can acquire any human language and that this contrasts strikingly with the linguistic capacities developed by pets, plants, and artifacts when placed in similar environmental situations. I take the truth of this observation to be almost self-evident. Indeed, in my view, it takes heroic obtuseness, of a kind generally restricted to academics and intellectuals on the make, to be blind to these obvious facts. The aim of linguistics is to describe and explain the fine structure of this capacity. Linguists following Chomsky call this capacity 'Universal Grammar' (UG) and its fine structure '(I-) Universals'.

How are UG and I-Universals studied? The short answer is any way one can. One particularly effective route into UG has been to consider the structure of UG against the backdrop of the 'logical problem of language acquisition,' aka 'Plato's Problem.' The problem amounts to this: The child ends up developing a linguistic system whose richness is much greater than what appears to be easily accessible from the input the child has access to, the Primary Linguistic Data (PLD). This gap between the information in the input and the knowledge attained must be bridged somehow. Chomskyans propose that it is bridged by innate properties of our language faculty. As a first approximation, these innate properties are what I-universals are all about. It is those properties that direct language growth. By comparing the informational gap between what is attained and what the PLD makes available it is possible to investigate the kind of structure that UG must have.

A second way of investigating UG has emerged in the wake of the minimalist program (Chomsky 1993 and subsequent work). Whereas it has been standard practice in generative grammar to approach universals from 'above' (assuming a richly specified UG, in order to address Plato's Problem), the Minimalist Program outlines a project for approaching universals from below, assuming a very minimal UG, in an attempt to address Darwin's Problem, or the logical problem of language evolution. This second approach becomes interesting to the degree that Plato's problem has been (at least partially) addressed. As we shall also see, Darwin's Problem and Plato's Problems share a common logic, that makes pursuing answers to them in tandem rewarding.