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Roll up for the Mystery Tour!¹

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There's a danger zone, not a stranger zone
Than the little plot I walk on that I call my home
Full of eerie sights, weird and skeery sights
Ev'ry vicious animal that creeps and crawls and bites!!

On the Amazon, the prophylactics prowl
On the Amazon, the hypodermics howl
On the Amazon, you'll hear a scarab scowl, and sting
...zodiacs on the wing...

Excerpt from 'On the Amazon.' Grey/Newman/Ellis.²

E&L's rich polemic against Language Universals and Universal Grammar provides an entertaining, at times dazzling, performance that is most reminiscent of modern representations of the Victorian side-show: for those of us of a certain age, the fairground scene in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang!* meets Sgt. Pepper (*Being for the benefit of Mr. Kite*), as we are presented with all manner of linguistic exotica, from languages bereft of consonantal onsets (Arrernte), to those defying the normal laws of constituency relations (Jiwarli), to those allegedly lacking even the most fundamental grammatical attribute, recursivity (Pirahá). If, at its worst, E&L's article evokes the

freak show, it also calls to mind the very best in nature documentaries, the image of Pablo Fanque replaced by David Attenborough in the rain forest, crouching over some particularly unlikely, exquisitely adapted, tree frog. Whichever allusion is the more appropriate, this is fascinating material, which should convince even the most agoraphobic armchair linguist of the phenomenal wealth of grammatical diversity that still remains out there (even at a such a late stage of language extinction).

Yet, for all that E&L make an irrefutable case *for* diversity, their case *against* generativist linguistics in general—and Universal Grammar in particular—is much less persuasive. Given space constraints I shall restrict attention to what I view as three critical failures of argumentation, involving two misunderstandings about the content and locus of UG, and a mistaken assumption about the theoretical significance of surface diversity. As a consequence of this mishandling of the brief, Universal Grammar—to continue the legal metaphor—walks free from the courtroom.

One of the more obvious misunderstandings of the paper emerges from E&L's discussion of the notion of grammatical subject (Section 4), where it is argued clearly but otiosely that the notion of subject most relevant to describing surface constructions in English cannot be applied directly, or in any way appropriately, to the description of the grammars of other languages. Regarding subjects, E&L write (2009: 440):

[L]inguists have also known for some time that the notion “subject’ is far from universal, and other languages have come up with strikingly different solutions... Having a [unified] subject relation is an efficient way to organize a language’s grammar because it bundles up different subtasks that most often need to be done together. *But languages also need ways to indicate when the*

properties do not coalesce... Given languages like Dyirbal, Acehnese or Tagalog, where the concepts of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ are dismembered in language-specific ways, *it is clear that a child pre-equipped by UG to expect its language to have a ‘subject’ could be sorely led astray* [emphases mine: NGD].

It is not clear what type of UG E&L have in mind, but it cannot be the generativist conception, given that one of the hallmarks of mainstream generativism since very early on in the development of the theory—at the very latest since Chomsky (1981)—has been precisely its rejection of subject as a unified concept. This is most clearly stated in the following paragraph from McCloskey (2001):

...[I]n the intellectual tradition represented by the frameworks of ‘Government and Binding’, ‘Principles and Parameters’ and the ‘Minimalist Program’, the notions [‘subject’ and ‘object’: NGD] play no (recognized) role at all. That tradition has always insisted that talk of ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ is either illicit or casual, and that reference to such terms is to be cashed out in terms of more primitive notions (phrase-structural measures of prominence, featural properties of heads, the theory of A-movement and so on)... McCloskey (2001: 157).

Generativists might disagree with functionalists about precisely which grammatical primitives interact to yield epiphenomenal ‘subject effects’ (even though—somewhat ironically—E&L’s tri-partite distinction (topic/agent/pivot, p. 40) is commonly accepted, if differently formalized), but there is really no general

disagreement about whether ‘subject’ has any theoretical status. It follows from this that no generative acquisitionist assumes—as E&L appear to—that a child “equipped by UG” would expect his language to have a subject, for the simple reason that this is never claimed to be part of UG.

If E&L misunderstand the content of UG, they also appear to misunderstand its ontology (in the computer science sense of the term): specifically, the relationship between UG and properties of end-state grammars. As Chomsky and others have repeatedly tried to articulate—albeit with changes in terminology over the years—UG is a theory of the *initial state*, which Chomsky now terms *FL* (Faculty of Language), not of any particular endstate grammar (L_{English} , L_{Jiwarli} , $L_{\text{Pirahá}}$, etc.). That UG/FL is ontologically distinct from any particular L is clear from this recent quote:

I understand *L* (for me, some variety of English) to be an attained state of a genetically-determined faculty of language *FL...*’ (Chomsky, cited in Stemmer 1999: 1)

The problem is not merely that UG is not claimed to be a property of final state grammars, but that it need not even be definitional of these grammars. As far back as the mid-seventies, Chomsky entertains the idea that the core properties of final state grammars are not exclusively, or even mainly, determined by UG principles:

I have been assuming that UG suffices to determine particular grammars (where again, a grammar is a system of rules and principles that generates an infinite class of sentences with their formal and semantic properties). But this

might not be the case. It is a coherent and perhaps correct proposal that the language faculty constructs a grammar only in conjunction with other faculties of mind. *If so, the language faculty itself provides only an abstract framework, an idealization that does not suffice to determine a grammar* (Chomsky 1975: 41) [emphasis mine: NGD].

Now, obviously one can take issue with the idea of any *apriori* knowledge of language, whether in the form of autonomous syntactic principles (Move, Merge, etc), as theories of UG/FL would have it, or in any other form (e.g. Slobin 1973, Bickerton 1984, Klein & Perdue 1997, amongst others): most cognitivists, for example, reject the idea of any crosslinguistic consistency in the initial state of language acquisition; see e.g. Tomasello 1995). In the end, whether UG exists and what form it takes are—or should be—empirical questions, albeit difficult ones. However, the crucial point here is that facts about attained, endstate grammars bear only tangentially on theories of UG. Baldly stated, the absence of Language Universals—granting for the sake of argument that these are a ‘myth’—does not imply the absence of UG. This is not simply an issue of abstractness (as E&L seem to believe, in their disparaging comment ‘expert linguistic eyes can spot the underlying common constructional bedrock, p. 432’). It is, rather, a category error: no matter how deep one digs into mature grammatical systems, there is no logical reason to expect that one will excavate UG in any recognizable form, any more than one should discover universal principles of embryology through an in-depth study of mature organisms.

The final point to address is less a direct misunderstanding about UG than an implicit misconception that runs throughout the paper, namely, the idea that surface diversity presents some kind of *prima facie* threat to proponents of UG, that UG is

challenged in direct proportion to the divergence between English and the weirdest, most exotic alternatives. In fact, quite the opposite is true: UG thrives—indeed depends—on diversity. This is so for two reasons. The first is an epistemological one: if it is true that children acquiring language settle quickly and effortlessly on uniform endstate grammars regardless of the properties of the language being acquired, then the case for innate grammatical knowledge is strengthened the greater the variability in the final state rule-systems and in the external conditions of language acquisition. Looked at the other way around, if there *were* clear and obvious Language Universals manifest in all end-state grammars—and, especially, if these universals could be explained in external, functionalist terms—there would be no need for UG to explain uniform convergence. This wouldn't mean that the theory was incorrect, just that it would be less necessary. (It's not a mystery that trains invariably end up at a railway station, rather than wandering at will all over the countryside: it's rather trickier to explain the directed behaviour of migratory species of birds or fish without appeal to some innate principles: see Dresher 1997, for discussion). The second reason that diversity is good for UG is that whenever UG principles *do* find surface expression—and *pace* E&L, I believe these kinds of universals can be shown to exist, see the commentaries by Baker, Pesetsky, Pinker & Jackendoff, amongst others—then the greater areal and typological distance between two varieties showing common traits, the more compelling the case for UG becomes. To draw on a final analogy to genetics: the fact that the DNA of all humans is 99.9% identical—regardless of race, gender or provenance—is less compelling evidence of the genetic uniformity of *all* organic life than the fact that we share 50% of our genes with a worm (*C. elegans*).³

In short, Evans & Levinson may offer us 'eerie sights, weird and skeery sights', but there's little here to truly terrify the stouthearted generativist.

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¹ A personal note. This commentary should not be construed in any way as a personal attack on either of the authors, for whom I have the greatest professional respect.

Steve Levinson, in particular, deserves my gratitude and continuing regard, not least because he was my first linguistics teacher (Cambridge, 1981) as well as my last-but-one employer (Nijmegen 2003). I sincerely hope that the views presented here will be

interpreted in the same spirit in which they were set down.

² © Jerry Leiber Music/Range Road Music Inc./Silver Seahorse Music LLC/Warner Chappell Music Inc. Recorded by various artists, most famously, by Don McLean (*Solo*, live album).

³ Source: ‘Worm could offer Parkinson’s Clue’

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