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Myths, magic, and poorly drawn battle lines: Commentary on Evans 2014

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Evans's *The language myth: Why language is not an instinct* is a not-so-subtle attempt to counterweigh Steven Pinker's (1994) *The language instinct*. For more than two decades now, opponents of Pinker's view of language have lamented the fact that introductory students (and nonspecialists in general) do not have access to a well-written, accessible, yet opposing, view of how language works. Enter *The language myth* (*TLM*), which reads like a manifesto out of the School of Cognitive Linguistics. In that respect, the book is a welcome addition to the fray, since there is, after all, significant room for discussion on just about every major point within the nativist program (dubbed, by E, the 'language-as-instinct hypothesis').

The basic premise of the book is that the language-as-instinct hypothesis consists of several related myths, which, when combined, provide the veneer of a believable theory. E deconstructs the overall hypothesis into six myths and attempts to debunk each of them individually. The manner in which this is organized and presented is both superbly readable and, unfortunately, fatally flawed. While it sounds like a good idea to present succinct 'myths', followed by a methodical take-down of each myth, this need for succinctness and ease of reading means that E is forced to

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simplify some very complicated and controversial facts. Debates that span decades and that have consumed thousands of printed journal pages are summarized into mere sentences, often in a way that is most pernicious for the language-as-instinct camp. Ultimately, the descriptions of the 'myths' are such gross misrepresentations of the generativist field, such cartoonish caricatures of the mainstream of generativist thinking, that it makes the debunking of said myths rather hollow.

Let us begin with a relatively minor example, followed by more serious objections below. The first myth addressed by E is that human language is fundamentally distinct from other forms of animal communication. E's position is that animal communication forms a continuum, with human language the bookend on the complex side of the continuum. The way the argument is made is rather simple: Charles Hockett's design features of language are presented, and then it is shown that various forms of animal communication share these features.

E's point is that for every feature of language, some form of animal communication exists that shares that particular design feature. For example, for the design feature 'displacement', E points to some evidence that chimps and other primates are able to refer to objects that are no longer in view, thus displaying this feature (55). E goes down the list of features in this way (oddly, omitting arbitrariness and discreteness), showing that some form of animal communication shares each individual design feature. But of course, as any instructor of an Introduction to Language course will tell you, Hockett's point was that human language has ALL of these design features, and there are no other forms of animal communication that have all of the features. This is a very basic point, but one that underscores the idea that in this book, the portrait of the generativist approach is often not an accurate depiction, but rather a crude sketch, designed to be easily debunked.

Consider next the chapter on language acquisition ('Is language innate?'). The chapter begins with a summary of the reasoning behind the nativist approach, which, once again, is thoroughly simplified and inaccurate (in fact, of the roughly eighty references in this chapter, there are only three to empirical work from a generativist perspective—Crain & Nakayama 1987 and perhaps Bickerton 1981, 1984—with the remaining seventy-five or so references overwhelmingly to usage-based empirical research). As an example of how damaging this is, consider E's presentation of the argument from the poverty of stimulus (101): 'The input children receive is impoverished, in the sense that language exposure is partial, to say the least; and there is no negative evidence to warn them off incorrect grammatical patterns'. This, according to E, predicts that errors should abound, and E suggests word order as an example: 'In short, children acquiring English should be just as likely to produce sentences with an OSV pattern … as the correct SVO pattern. Yet children don't make these sorts of logical errors. Chomsky's conclusion was that a blueprint for grammar must be innate'.

Let's put aside the fact that canonical word order is exactly the wrong kind of phenomenon to apply the argument from the poverty of the stimulus to (see below) and instead consider how this passage would be interpreted by a young student learning linguistics. If I were such a student and I read the two whole paragraphs devoted to the argument from the poverty of the stimulus, I would be thoroughly confused about why this is even a debate. From this cursory presentation of the argument from the poverty of stimulus, I might conclude that the theory of linguistic nativism is illogical and nonsensical. I would be far more convinced by the ensuing thirty-one pages of empirically grounded, well-explicated argumentation for a usage-based view of how language is acquired. I do not believe this was the intention of the author (to so disfigure the debate as to render it meaningless), but sadly, that is how it reads.

Take one final misrepresentation of the generativist field:

> The language-as-instinct thesis … is a PRESUMPTION. It follows not from careful observation and description of countless languages, but from a particular INTELLECTUAL COMMITMENT. Chomsky ASSUMED that our knowledge of language is an integral part of our genetic endowment. And because of this PRESUMPTION, Chomsky's followers are, at least in principle, absolved from studying other languages. The irony of this is that the language-as-instinct thesis is thereby SHIELDED by this from the full extent of the counter evidence. (68; emphasis added)

There are at least two problems with this passage (which is representative of the tenor of the book in general). First, the 'language-as-instinct thesis' is not a presumption or an assumption, nor does

it follow solely from an intellectual commitment. It was not Chomsky's ASSUMPTION that our knowledge of language is an integral part of our genetic endowment; rather, it was his CONCLUSION. Chomsky (and colleagues) have laid out the well-known 'logical problem of language acquisition' (the LPLA, as described elsewhere in the book, actually): that every child acquires language quickly, easily, uniformly (within limits), without errors (of the relevant type), and in the absence of negative evidence. The thesis, therefore, is not founded on the obstinate commitment of generativists (as suggested in the passage above), but is founded on the basis of an empirically verified, natural mystery (the LPLA) that demands an explanation.

Second, it is true that the ethos within the generativist framework is that all languages are cut from the same cloth, and so no one language is privileged for the purposes of investigating the underlying structure of human language. This means that English is as good a language as any for this purpose, but so is any other language on the planet (or indeed in the history of the planet). While the field in general remains both Anglo- and Eurocentric, for reasons of practicality, the suggestion that nativists are shielded from crosslinguistic facts is simply breathtaking in its misrepresentation. Some of the very best linguists, both generativist and nongenerativist alike, have made their names on the basis of the study of lesser-known languages. I could name names of famous generativist linguists who are known for their crosslinguistic research, but the list would be far too long for this short commentary. Thus the argument that generativists somehow shield themselves from potentially recalcitrant crosslinguistic facts is plainly incorrect.

In sum, then, while I like a good fight, the manner in which these particular battle lines have been drawn seems far too stark, and artificially so. Consider this one final passage:

> [L]earning a language is a bottom-up process. Children don't begin with pre-given rules that they are born with: language learning is not guided, magically, top-down, by innate knowledge. Children actually have to do the hard graft of working things out slowly, from the bottom up. They learn single chunks, and slowly, over time, with exposure and practice, they slowly build generalizations that allow them to start to form the grammar of the language they are acquiring. (111)

This sets up the language-as-instinct hypothesis and the language-as-use hypothesis as entirely mutually exclusive. But in fact, I (along with many of my generativist colleagues) argue that language acquisition is both (i) a rule-governed, top-down process as well as (ii) a bottom-up process of learning. The latter (ii) is a process of lexical learning, collocational learning, chunking, and so forth, which typically operates over the most common phenomena in the input (such as canonical transitive word order, referred to earlier). The idea that children often acquire formulaic phrases, and then decompose them over time, has been around since at least the early 1960s and has been recognized as a part of language acquisition by all but the most extreme generativists for many decades now. The former (i), however, is guided by innate principles (call this universal grammar, if you please), and typically manifests itself in the linguistic phenomena for which there is little or no evidence in the input. These are the phenomena that resist analysis on the basis of input alone and are thus of interest to generativists. They include negative principles such as some of the binding principles, or abstract semantic principles such as downward entailment, or relatively rare and complex structures involving long-distance dependencies, such as raising, control, or relative clauses, and so on. Phenomena like canonical word order (cited by E) are, in this respect, rather uninteresting, simply because such phenomena COULD be learned on the basis of extensive evidence in the input, coupled with general learning principles.

All of this is to say that generativists actually acknowledge the role of input and learning, but also consider the possibility that some aspects of language are not learnable purely from inductive learning of the input. We choose to focus on those phenomena that appear to be difficult/impossible to acquire on the basis of input and general learning mechanisms alone since these are the phenomena that constitute the real mystery. Surely, if such phenomena exist, it is not unreasonable to ask how children quickly, easily, and universally acquire them, in the absence of significant negative evidence. This, to me, does not seem to be the purview of magicians or myths, but rather of good, solid, empirically based, scientific inquiry.

To conclude then, superficially, *The language myth* checks all the boxes: potentially controversial, easy to read, methodically organized. But as one thumbs through the opening pages, it

quickly becomes evident that this is not a genuine tour de force, à la Pinker 1994. No, *TLM* is not the antidote to the long cognitivist nightmare that is *The language instinct*. In fact, by the end of the book, I fear it not only misses the point, but if adopted to any degree within the field, will also mislead young researchers and students of language into thinking that the debate is between E's brand of linguistics on the one hand, and a bunch of raving, delusional, irrational bullies on the other. Ultimately, then, *TLM* will do little to advance the debate on linguistic nativism, although it might very well energize those already in E's camp.

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Another look at the universal grammar hypothesis: Commentary on Evans 2014

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It is important to recognize that *The language myth* (*TLM*) is not a research monograph, but is instead aimed at a popular audience, and therefore it should be judged in this light. Popular books necessarily oversimplify certain issues, on pain of not being very popular, yet *TLM* does satisfy its intended purpose: it demonstrates, in a clear and engaging way, that the existence of a universal grammar, involving structure or syntactic knowledge that is unique to language and not learned, is quite far from established fact (see also e.g. Ambridge et al. 2014, Christiansen & Chater 2008, Elman et al. 1996, Evans & Levinson 2009, Everett 2012, Goldberg 2013, 2016, Hurford 2012, Newmeyer 2016, Sampson 2005, Tomasello 1995).

The position that *TLM* counters is no straw man, as the following easy-to-find quotes make clear (boldface added):

> Two facts about language learning are indisputable. First, only a human baby, but not her pet kitten, can learn a language. It is clear, then, that there must be some element in our biology that accounts for this unique ability. Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG), **an innate form of knowledge specific to language**, is a concrete theory of what this ability is. (Yang 2004:451)

> Generative linguistic theory stands on the hypothesis that **grammar cannot be acquired solely on the basis of an analysis of the input**, but depends, in addition, on **innate structure** within the learner to guide the process of acquisition. (Lidz et al. 2003:295)

> the most controversial claim of Noam Chomsky's is that **Language is also an instinct. Many parts of Language are built in, or *innate*. Much of Language is an ability hard-wired into our brains by our genes … . There are very good reasons to believe … that a human faculty for Language (perhaps in the form of a 'Language organ' in the brain) is innate. We call this facility *Universal Grammar* (or UG).** (Carnie 2013:19)

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