

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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Many of the familiar arguments in favor of a universal grammar are addressed and countered in *TLM*, and the book weaves together discussions drawn from research in linguistics, psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, and anthropology. Evans agrees that human language is distinct from animal communication in many ways, even while he draws certain parallels between them (Ch. 2). While it follows from this generally agreed-upon conclusion that humans' general CAPACITY for language is in some way unique to our species, it simply does not follow that any knowledge or structure that is specific to language need be 'innate' (cf. Adger 2015:77 and the first quote above). Instead, a combination of PREREQUISITES for language may be required, prerequisites that need not themselves be specific to language and that may interact with one another and the environment in complicated ways (Ch. 4). This more subtle perspective concerning how phenotypes relate to genotypes has much evidence in its favor and is, in fact, uncontroversial within biology generally (see Blumberg 2005 for a popular overview).

E addresses the issue of whether there exists evidence of provable (i.e. falsifiable) language universals in Ch. 3. He briefly surveys a range of work on absolute and implicational (i.e. 'if a language has X, then it has Y') universals, and covers topics ranging from phonology to syntax in clear and jargon-free prose. He concludes that falsifiable language universals are relatively rare and are typically explicable in terms of the functional pressures of communication as well as domain-general constraints (see also Newmeyer 2016).

Ch. 4 focuses on language acquisition, emphasizing the role of statistics in the input, as well as the functions of constructions that are learned. This chapter also reviews some important evidence that human 'cultural-intelligence' serves as a key and uniquely human prerequisite for language (see also Ch. 8; and for relevant data, see Herrmann et al. 2007, Tomasello 2009).

Ch. 5 discusses the neural underpinnings of language, emphasizing arguments against a modular linguistic system. Here it may be worth pointing out that even if there do exist areas in the typically developed adult brain that are devoted to language (as argued in Fedorenko et al. 2011), it would not provide evidence in favor of the universal grammar hypothesis (see also Bates 1993). For example, everyone recognizes that the knowledge and structure of written language is learned and not innate, and yet there seems to be an area of the visual cortex that selectively responds to written words (Cohen et al. 2002, Dehaene & Cohen 2011).

The older notion that meaning can be captured by discrete, universal, possibly innate symbols ('Mentalese') is countered in Ch. 6 with the perspective that our concepts are instead grounded by our own real and imagined perceptions and experiences in and of the world (see also Bergen 2012 for a very readable introduction). The following chapter (Ch. 7) reviews evidence for the idea that language, as part of our experience, can shape our concepts and even our perceptions in subtle but detectable ways.

TLM paints generative grammar in quite broad strokes, and occasionally in a regrettably dismissive tone. Researchers working within the generative paradigm, broadly construed, take a wide range of views on what sorts of knowledge or structure may be part of universal grammar (e.g. Kayne 1994, Hauser et al. 2002). Ray Jackendoff is mentioned as if he upholds a strong version of the universal grammar hypothesis, when in fact over the last two decades he has championed a move quite far away from mainstream generative grammar, and much more in the direction that E defends (e.g. Culicover & Jackendoff 2005; see Goldberg 1996). Steven Pinker is also portrayed as if his stance in *The language instinct* (1994) has been unaltered, when in fact he too has moved away from the Chomskyan perspective in many respects (e.g. Pinker & Jackendoff 2005, Pinker 2013 [1989]). Because of its broad-brush approach, *TLM* has understandably raised some hackles; there is in fact a bit of 'locker room towel-snapping' toward those who have taken contrary positions,¹ but in most places, *TLM* strives for a light-hearted tone (with much discussion of *supermodels kissing window washers*).

As shorthand for his own perspective, E uses the phrase 'language-as-use'. Although I agree with many of the conclusions that E draws, and I do believe language use is of central importance, we 'usage-based' researchers owe an explanation of how and why languages are used the way they are. Some of these issues are discussed in the final chapter of *TLM*, but there is much

¹ <https://ronbc2.wordpress.com/2014/09/23/the-language-myth/>

more work to be done. As Liz Bates used to say, language is a new machine made out of old parts (Bates 1993; see also Ullman 2015). A key goal, as E views it and I agree, is to explain exactly what these old parts are and how they combine to give rise to our impressive, complex, emergent knowledge of language.

The notion that humans possess innate knowledge that is specific to language has been widely taken for granted within linguistics and has captured the popular imagination. It is time to rethink this fundamental assumption, and *The language myth* serves as a readable entry into many of the relevant issues.

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Is our mental grammar just a set of constructions? Commentary on Evans 2014

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According to this book, ‘each of us carries around in our heads a “mental grammar” far more impressive than any written grammar’ (6); this grammar is made up of ‘abstract rules’ that can generate a ‘seemingly infinite number of novel sentences’ (12). Since this mental grammar has properties, we could decide to be interested in them and seek to make them formally explicit. In that case, we could decide to investigate my mental grammar or yours, my grammar as an infant or as it is now, or even a more complex and abstract construct such as the ‘grammar of English’ or of French. Given that the above statements are made in a general fashion, however, that is, with respect to all (neurotypical) humans, we could also be interested in mental grammar as such, which exists in all human heads. We would then make assertions about grammar in general: this would be ‘universal’ grammar in a technical sense. A rational discussion can now arise over the properties ascribed to this mental grammar, and how, in general, it is acquired, for the goals of this research program are in fact SHARED with the generative tradition attacked in this book (though referring to it throughout as the ‘language-as-instinct crowd’ and presenting it as a bunch of lunatics living in a Hegelian dream world clearly will not help either the field or rational discussion).

Regarding how the grammar is acquired, Chomsky in particular has tirelessly argued for a half-century that the so-called ‘innateness hypothesis’ with respect to language acquisition is a trivial claim rather than a profoundly controversial one. All parties agree that acquiring a language is not like learning to play the piano. The former is universal (present in about 7 billion people), not only as such but also in terms of its development along biologically timed milestones. Hence it is not a particular achievement for which special effort or talents are required. Its acquisition is actually very hard to PREVENT—so hard that trying to do so would amount to an atrocity. It would be nice if the same were true of piano playing. So in whatever sense it would be true that language is not ‘something that emerges automatically, and effortlessly’ (3), it would also be false. The same applies to Evans’s fervent rejection of the claim that language is an ‘instinct’ (99–100). In whatever sense this claim would be false, it would also be true, for the reason just given: language