The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory

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The object of inquiry in Linguistics is the nature of the human ability to acquire and use a natural language, and the goal of linguistic theory is an explicit characterization of that ability. When we look at the communication system of other species, and at the abilities that can be induced in non-human animals in the laboratory, it becomes clear that our linguistic ability is quite specific to our species, and undoubtedly a product of our biology. But beyond that basic existence proof, how do we go about determining the specifics of the human language capacity? What we have to go on is what we find in the systems of individual languages, and there are two primary ways in which we infer the nature of Language in general from the properties of individual languages. The first of these is the argument from the Poverty of the Stimulus, the inference that a property of a given language for which evidence is plausibly lacking in the data available to the language learner must be attributed to the language faculty. Arguments of this sort are not easy to construct (though not as difficult as sometimes suggested), and they apply only to a tiny part of Language as a whole. By far the commonest path to generalization from languages to Language is the search for universals, properties (positive, negative, inferential, etc.) that characterize every natural language. But while it seems perfectly natural to say that whatever is true of every language must ipso facto be true of Language, arguments of this sort are also quite problematic. In phonology, morphology, and syntax, factors of historical development, functional underpinnings, limitations of the learning situation, and others conspire to compromise the explanatory value of arguments from observed universals.

The conflict between the evident particularity of the human language faculty and the difficulty of establishing most of its properties in a secure way poses a real dilemma for our field, one that cannot be avoided by ignoring or denying the reality of either of its poles. We cannot assume that the tools we have are sufficient to support a science of the object we wish to study in linguistics, the human language faculty. But on the other hand, we also should not assume that the inadequacy of those tools is evidence for the non-existence of the object on which we hope to shed light.