

Linguistics as an Autonomous and Independent Discipline

In my opinion, the issue of linguistics as an autonomous and independent discipline calls for further comment and reflection. It seems obvious that what is proposed as an explanation within linguistics — or any other discipline for that matter — cannot be accepted if it contradicts observed or proven facts from other disciplines. This, by virtue of the usually unstated premise of all scientific endeavour that the universe is somehow coherent. In this sense, then, linguistics is not an independent discipline, and cannot be without cutting itself off from reality.

It does not follow from this, however, that linguistics is not autonomous, that it is part of another discipline, governed by its aims and methods. A way to see the issue more clearly might be to reflect for a moment on our object of study, language itself. While nobody could argue that language exists in a vacuum, independent of the reality of, say, our vocal cords and our mental faculties, there is surely agreement on the fact that in our universe of experience there is an object, distinct from all other objects, consisting of observable words and sentences. Granted this distinct existence, evident to all, it follows that there is here an object worthy of scientific study, an object whose nature we should try to discern. It also follows that the means of approaching and studying this unique object cannot be quite the same as those required by other objects of study. This last point is based on the premise that our methods of observation and analysis should be determined by language itself, and not by extraneous considerations, such as the philosophical stand that science can treat only what is measurable, or the practical aim of making a machine that speaks.

My point is this: linguistics cannot remain independent of the valid findings of other disciplines — and vice versa. It must however maintain its autonomy as a discipline (aims and methods), governed only by the requirements imposed on it by language itself.

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Dear Victor,

Thank you for your prompt and pertinent reply to my note. Although we agree that no discipline cannot be independent of the substantiated findings of other disciplines, you are not convinced that linguistics is an autonomous discipline since its aim and methods are determined by its object of study, language itself. Indeed, you call into question the very existence of language as a distinct object.

Your first point is that leading linguists are not agreed on the nature of the word in Greenlandic and in Chinese. The structure of the vocable in these languages is certainly very different from that in English and is not "evident to all" (in fact, it is not evident to anybody) but this is no reason for declaring that the word itself is not observable. On the contrary, it seems to me that the scientific attitude here is to attempt to understand these differences through observation and analysis. As an example of what I mean, I refer you to the grammars of three Eskimo dialects written by my colleague Ronald Lowe, especially the introduction, where the structure of the word in those dialects is compared with English word structure.

Your second point, that some theoreticians have no place for the word in their theory, seems to put the cart before the horse. I do not know of any language whose speakers are unaware of such units. Sapir's well known remarks in Chapter 2 of his *Language* are eloquent in this respect. In short, as a basis for the scientific study of language, I find the common experience of speakers sounder than the elucubrations of linguists, be they leading or not.

Your third point mentions the difficulty in bringing "words and sentences into the realm of science". I fully agree that a method for observing and analyzing the word (and as a consequence the sentence) is an essential condition for any scientific approach to language. This is, in fact, why I consider the finding of just such a method by Guillaume to be the most significant advance in linguistics so far in this century. On the other hand, regardless of the merits or otherwise of this method, the existence of words is not dependent on our ability to study them scientifically.

Finally, you suggest that we should "put science first" before grammatical theory. I maintain that we should put languages first, each with its own grammar, so that the science of language can be solidly based on observation. Ultimately, the "compatibility between grammar and science" depends on the careful observation (cf. V.H.Y. 4-1b) of the grammatical meanings of any morpheme — observation which, albeit introspective by nature, can give rise to scientifically valid data (cf. Chafe 3-11) — and the analysis of these data in the light of a general hypothesis concerning the nature of language. There is nothing ad hoc or unscientific about such a procedure and the only a priori assumption is that of anyone involved in a scientific pursuit: that his object of study is somehow orderly, systematic, understandable.

All best wishes,

Walter Hirtle