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# UNCONFIRMED SIGHTINGS OF AN 'ORDINARY LANGUAGE' THEORY OF LANGUAGE

ABSTRACT. It is unfortunate that Francis Y. Lin, in 'Chomsky on the "ordinary language" view of language' pays little attention to his own remark, 'Chomsky's criticisms make us realize that we should not be content with general and vague formulations of convention, ability, and so on. We must make such notions precise and provide details' Lin speaks so imprecisely and provides so few details of notions on which he relies heavily, such as 'general learning mechanism' and 'sentence frame', that readers must employ large amounts of guesswork to place even a halfway specific interpretation on his proposals and claims.

## 1. GENERAL LEARNING MECHANISMS

Only one item in the list of characteristics of the 'common-sense view of language' that Lin gives in the first paragraph of his article relates directly to how languages are acquired, namely the statement that 'there are general learning mechanisms in the brain'.[1] Since Lin does not identify the general learning mechanisms that he would claim that human beings have, he has not even begun to deal seriously with the question of how much of the acquisition of human languages can be accomplished through the action of such mechanisms, or alternatively, what more might be needed beyond general learning mechanisms in order to provide a viable scenario for how children acquire their native languages.[2] It is only in the last paragraph of his paper that Lin even addresses this latter question, where he suggests that 'the innate basis of language ..., in the weak sense of the word 'innate', ... consists of *notions* such as time, person and number, and *notional abilities* such as those of individuating objects and processes, of making the subject-predicate distinction, of telling 'major linkages' from 'minor linkages', and so on'.[3]

Perhaps Lin intends 'general learning mechanism' to take in some of the things that he mentions, such as 'training', 'conditioning', 'practice', and 'analogy'. However, he has not made dear whether that is his understanding of 'general learning mechanism', nor how those factors function in learning, nor what else he counts as a 'general learning mechanism'.

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Lin says very little about what constitutes an analogy and illustrates 'analogy' with examples that are more plausibly interpreted as reflecting not merely similarity of some sort between sentences but identity of their structures or of parts of their structures, as when he speaks of *John shaved him* being interpreted on the analogy of *John hit him*. He does not say where that supposed analogy comes in in a scenario for language acquisition, nor what exactly is being analogized to what. In acquiring new vocabulary, a child surely makes use of the syntactic structures that it has already learned, e.g., a child's understanding of a word that it has not yet mastered is facilitated by its being able to fit it into a syntactic structure it has already learned. But what is the knowledge stored in the child's brain, to which it is assimilating words as it acquires them? Lin speaks in some places as if the relevant knowledge is of specific sentences and their interpretations (*John shaved him* and *John hit him*), and in other places as if it is his 'sentence frames', which (if one charitably interprets his *you, somebody, do something*, and whatnot as euphemisms for syntactic categories) amount to partial syntactic structures. It is not clear whether Lin intends his 'analogies' always to be to specific sentences, always to (open-ended) syntactic structures, or sometimes to the one and sometimes to the other. If he means his analogies always or even sometimes to be to specific sentences, then he owes his readers a statement of how broad a notion of analogy he is willing to admit (how about an analogy in which one interprets sentences in ways parallel to sentences with which they rhyme?) and of how children select from what is potentially a vast range of analogies the ones that it may be useful for them to exploit. If he is analogizing sentences to already learned structures, then that is no more an analogy than counting is an analogy for someone who already knows numbers.

Lin's statement at the beginning of section 2.2 that the 'ordinary language' view of language 'holds that a language is learnt, through training, conditioning, or practice' conflates the issues of whether training, conditioning, and/or practice are a necessary part of the acquisition of a language and of whether they are sufficient for acquiring a language, that is, whether they do the whole work of language acquisition. He does not say what roles 'training', 'conditioning', and 'practice' play in the scenario for language acquisition that he envisions, and his puzzling use of *or* here raises doubts as to whether he has even sorted out in his mind the quite different roles that they could well play, and their relationship to (other?) 'general learning mechanisms'. I would expect that 'conditioning' and 'practice' would be involved not in the initial learning of something but in its retention after one has learned it provisionally (cf. the slogan

'Use it or lose it'), irrespective of **how** one has learned it, and that the role of 'training' in the acquisition of a first language is negligible. The idea that 'the child is explicitly taught' such things as the noncoreferentiality of *John* and *him* in *John hit him* ranks in implausibility with the idea of a community assembling to draw up a Rousseauian social contract. Lin has provided little clue as to how anything gets into the child's mind to be conditioned or practiced.

It should be noted, though, that Chomsky has not gotten very much more specific about how a language is acquired. While he has provided a scenario in terms of 'parameter setting' for the acquisition of 'core grammar' (e.g., when a child acquiring English identifies a predicate as followed by its object in a phrase such as *open the door*, it sets a mental switch for 'head before complements' rather than 'head after complements'), he has remained silent about how the 'periphery' of a language is acquired and seriously understates the importance of what he regards as 'periphery'. The periphery of a language, according to Chomsky, includes its entire lexicon, and much of the syntax of particular syntactic constructions is built into the lexical entries of those morphemes that have special roles in that construction, as in his allusions (Chomsky 1986, 74, 118, 122, 157) to the dictionary entries for the *be* and *by* of the English passive construction. The entry of *by* says that its object takes on the thematic role that the subject of the given verb would otherwise have, which is a semantic analog of the part of the passive transformation (long ago abandoned by Chomsky) that moved the subject into the position of the object of *by*.

The diverse range of detailed semantic, syntactic, and morphological information that must be included in a lexicon such as Chomsky envisions makes the acquisition of that information a formidable task. Moreover, to identify the syntactic and/or semantic relations among words that a child would need to know in order to successfully set parameters, the child has to have already at least partially acquired the lexical entries of the words in the utterances that trigger a parameter-setting event; thus the core and the periphery of a language would have to be acquired hand in hand. Until Chomsky proposes some specific mechanism for the acquisition of the periphery, there are no grounds for accepting his implicit claim that the core and the periphery are acquired by different mechanisms, i.e., that whatever is responsible for acquisition of the periphery is not up to the task of also acquiring the core. His failure to take any position on how children acquire the peripheries of their languages removes all substance from his claim that the acquisition of the core requires a special mechanism (the setting of values for genetically determined parameters).

## 2. WHAT 'SENTENCE FRAMES' MIGHT BE

Lin's exposition of his own conception of syntactic knowledge is maddeningly inexplicit. His discussion of syntax and its acquisition is mainly in terms of a notion of 'sentence frame', though he also alludes at one point to processes for deriving sentence frames from other sentence frames. The closest that he comes to a definition of 'sentence frame(s)' is: 'ways in which words should be used in order to form grammatical sentences'.[4] Most of his examples of putative sentence frames have the form of sentences of English (1a), though one pair contains a category name as a placeholder (1b), and one is not a sentence but a nonfinite verb phrase that (in different contexts) could be used either as a complement or as a modifier of a sentence or verb phrase (1c):

(1)a. You miss somebody or something. (Lin's (8))
b. Somebody is too ADJ to do something. (his (19))
c. Having done something. (his (36))

He speaks of various English sentences as instantiating particular frames, as where *John misses Mary* instantiates (1a). His formulations of the frames do not make explicit which words are to be interpreted as specific linguistic elements (*miss* in (1a), *too* and *to* in (1b)) and which of them are to be interpreted as indicating what sort of expressions can be substituted in the given position (*you* in (1a), *do something* in (1b, c)). If (1c) was not a slip on his part, he appears to countenance frames for expressions of different categories, in which case he needs a notation that specifies what each frame's syntactic category is.

The ubiquitous *somebody* and *something* of Lin's frames, if taken literally, are far too specific for accurate descriptions of the conventions relating to many lexical items. For example, since they are singular, if they were taken literally, they would restrict the positions where they appear to being filled by singular M's. The obvious charitable interpretation to put on such elements (by saying hardly anything about their interpretation, Lin relies heavily on the reader's charity) is that they are place-holders, to be filled by some class or other of M's. Lin does not say how he would describe the possible fillers of these positions, but his apparent willingness to allow (1c) as a 'sentence frame' suggests that he would allow sentence frames that specify possible forms of M's in terms of words and place-holders. With much charity, one can thus interpret Lin as attempting to reinvent the syntactic equivalent of the wheel, namely phrase-structure grammar. Extending such charity further, one can regard his descriptive scheme as a very rough approximation to the scheme of syntactic analysis

that is well known under the name 'Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar' (GPSG, Gazdar et al. 1985), in that his statement that 'Some sentence frames can be derived from others' is suggestive of the GPSG notion of a 'meta-rule'.[5]

Lin notes that the position of *do something* in his frame (19) (*Somebody is too ADJ to do something*) can be filled by a stative VP, that is, a VP that does not denote 'doing something'. He defends this inaccurate formulation by citing Leonard Bloomfield's (1935, 174) poorly choosen term 'actor-action type' for declarative sentences of the form NP VP. That Bloomfield might have called *know the answer* or *be sick* an 'action' is completely beside the point. Lin purports to be presenting a scheme of analysis in terms of 'sentence frames' that he formulates as sequences of English words, some of which refer to those very words and others of which are to be understood as placeholders. If the placeholder words are to be understood in something other than their literal senses, Lin has the duty to specify how they are to be understood, and he cannot deputize the long-dead Bloomfield to do that for him. I surmise that his 'do something', like Bloomfield's 'action', is a euphemism for 'verb phrase': his squeamish avoidance of grammatical terms is as inexplicable as Bloomfield's.

Lin has totally missed the point of one linguistic analysis that he mentions, namely that in which verbs such as *seem, appear*, and *happen* are treated as having underlying sentential complements whose subject becomes the surface subject of *seem* etc.[6] He treats *John seems to be happy* as 'simply an instance of the sentence frame "Somebody seems to be ADJ", thus incorrectly restricting the subject to an instance of 'somebody' and incorrectly restricting the infinitive expression to one of the form 'be ADJ'. In actual fact, the subject can be any NP whatever, and the infinitive expression can be any VP that has an infinitive form and allows that NP as its subject:

(2) It appears to be raining.
There happen to be some errors in his argument.
No offence seems to have been taken at your remarks.

*Seem* and its congeners impose no restriction on the surface subject: rather, the conditions that any NP filling that role must meet are imposed by the infinitival VP. *Seem*, etc. combine semantically with a proposition corresponding to the subject plus the infinitival VP, as in paraphrases such as 'It seems as if [no offence was taken at your remarks]'.

Lin raises, but does not answer, the question 'Are sentence frames surface structures, deep structures, or conceptual structures?'. His statement that 'there is no need to talk about surface or deep structures, there is

no need to create something mysterious' is puzzling, since there is nothing particularly mysterious about the notion 'surface structure',[7] and his examples of 'sentence frames' resemble surface structures at least with regard to the order in which their parts appear, aside from his (33) ('I wonder [the men expect who to see them]'), whose status he does not make clear: I can't tell whether it is supposed to count as a 'sentence frame', nor what the status is in his framework of combinations in which an element (here, *who*) occupies a position that it is not allowed to fill in the surface form of an English sentence.

There is, though, one important respect in which the question that Lin poses is unclear. In one interpretation, it asks about what level of linguistic structure sentence frames relate to, which is the way that I have interpreted it in suggesting that its answer is clearly 'surface structure', though in so answering it, I have taken the question to be sloppily formulated, since that answer (and my suggestion that Lin is busy reinventing the syntactic wheel) takes Lin's 'are surface structures . . . ' to mean 'are surface configurations of syntactic units', that is, not whole structures on that level, but prefabricated parts that can be assembled into whole surface structures. The alternative interpretation of the question would take it literally, with a sentence frame being some representation of a whole sentence, rather than a skeleton of a whole sentence (or of a whole expression of any category?), in which case sentence frame would be not 'frames' but 'models' for the construction of other sentences. I will continue to make assumptions that conform to the former interpretation of the question, the one that validates Lin's choice of the word 'frame'.

I have hitherto ignored an important detail of Lin's proposed frames, one which takes them beyond the realm of phrase structure rules, namely that he allows them to include negative information about coreference, as in (3):

(3) Somebody does something to him.

where 'him' and 'somebody' do not refer to the same person. (Lin's (26))

As usual, there is the problem of deciding which words in the frame are used metalinguistically and which ones are self-denoting. Here, Lin forces the reader to distinguish two degrees of metalinguistic usage: *somebody* marks a position that can be filled by any NP (not necessarily one that denotes a person: *The bullet hit him*), and *him* marks a position that can be filled by a personal pronoun, not necessarily a 3rd person masculine singular one. A more serious indeterminacy is with regard to whether (3) is to be understood as a positive condition, which licenses sentences in which the pronoun and the NP do not corefer, or as a negative condition, which

excludes sentences in which they do corefer. If the former, Lin has given no clue as to why the general learning mechanisms, whatever they are, would yield such a condition as 'where "him" and "somebody" do not refer to the same person'. Do these mechanisms simply throw in any old conditions that might be instantiated in sentences that a child interprets (perhaps, 'where "him" and "somebody" denote persons who support different football teams', or '... belong to the same family')? Or has Lin tacitly assumed that the learning mechanisms will pay attention only to factors such as coreference that are relevant to syntactic restrictions? If the latter, then his general learning mechanisms are doing the work of language acquisition not unaided but under the direction of something that guides their efforts. And if Lin intends (3) as a negative condition, he needs to say how a child would extract from its experience the negative information that (3) would then embody. Note that the experience of hearing someone say *John talked about him* in a context in which *him* evidently refers to Julius Caesar gives a child no information about whether it could also be used with reference to John talking about himself.

## 3. LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE AS CONSCIOUS

I am puzzled as to why Lin makes the proposition that knowledge of a language is conscious (or at least, 'accessible to consciousness') a part of his view of language, let alone why he gives it the place of prominence that he does. That proposition does not follow from his conception of knowledge of a language as 'practical knowledge', since people generally have only fragmentary conscious knowledge, if any, of most areas of practical knowledge (e.g., knowledge of how to raise and lower the pitch of one's voice or of how to climb a tree, let alone of how to recognize different persons from their faces and voices).

Lin endorses uncritically Dummett's statement (1993, 96) that practical knowledge 'shows itself ... partly by a readiness to acknowledge as correct a formulation of that which is known when it is presented', which for Lin implies that speakers of a language are 'able to acknowledge whether a formulation of this [linguistic] knowledge is true or not'. The fact of the matter is, however, that speakers of a language as readily assent to false as to true statements about their knowledge, just as long as the statement's falsehood is not too blatant. For example, speakers of American English are happy to agree that they follow a convention of saying *You're welcome* in response to someone saying *Thank you*, even though that misrepresents the actual conventions (NB: plural) in several important respects: one convention licences *Thank you* as a way of expressing gratitude for a favor

(though there are other ways that one can do that, and other things that one can do by saying *Thank you*), another convention requires that one acknowledge expressions of gratitude for favors, and yet another convention makes the uttering of *You're welcome* a way of discharging that obligation (though there are several other ways). When *Thank you* is used not to express gratitude for a favor but to acknowledge a compliment or accept an offer, a response of *You're welcome* is quite bizarre:

(4)a. Mary: That's a nice shirt you're wearing, Bill.
Bill: Thank you.
Mary: *You're welcome.

b. Tom: Would you like coffee or tea?
Ann: Tea, thank you
Tom: *You're welcome.

Moreover, speakers often vehemently deny accurate statements about features of their speech of which they are unaware, as when natives of the northern United States won't believe you when you tell them that they usually pronounce /tr/ and /dr/ with the affricate consonants of church and judge. (When Russian is spoken with an American accent, *trudnyj* 'difficult' sounds like *chudnyj* 'miraculous'.)

Aside from a brief allusion to a convention of 'truthfulness and trust' (a convention which really is not in the realm of 'knowledge of a language'), the only kind of linguistic convention that Lin discusses is his 'sentence frames', and it is only for that part of linguistic knowledge that his claim that linguistic knowledge is accessible to consciousness does any work for him. Or at least, the only plausible interpretation that I can place on his statements that native speakers of a language have conscious knowledge of sentence frames is that they can verify the correctness of a sentence frame by judging as acceptable sentences that conform to that frame.[8]

## 4. CONVENTIONS

It is hard to reconcile the first sentence of Lin's section 3.2.1 ('Let us start with the idea that a language is convention-governed activity') with the second sentence ('A language ... consists of all the sentences in the language ...'): activity doesn't consist of sentences, nor even of events of uttering or writing or understanding sentences. I can at best interpret this passage as a sloppy way of saying that conventions govern the use of whatever linguistic units a language makes available to its users.

Lin devotes much space to arguing that 'conventions are everywhere in the language', but he makes no real attempt to identify what the conventions are that are reflected in the facts that he cites. In saying, 'The answer is again that this is convention', with reference to questions such as 'Why do we have to say "You miss somebody" and not "You miss about somebody"?', Lin does not seriously address such questions. He notes correctly that verbs in English differ with regard to whether their objects can be marked with a preposition, and if so, what the preposition is, but he makes no attempt to identify the conventions that are reflected in the facts about particular verbs. Is there a convention of not combining *miss* with *about*? Surely not any more than there are conventions of not combining it with the dozens of other prepositions that it does not allow – there just is no convention of combining it with *about*. Is there a convention of combining miss directly with its object? Or is there rather a convention of combining any semantically transitive verb directly with its object, which is overridden by more specific conventions, such as one licensing the marking of the object of certain verbs by a particular preposition (as in *We looked at them*)? Any account of a language as a system of conventions needs to specify the division of labor among the different conventions, and Lin has made no attempt in that direction.

Lin's explanation of the 'rule of traffic that drivers must [N.B.] stop their cars when the traffic light turns red', namely that 'there are sufficient regularities between the traffic light's turning red and the drivers' stopping their cars' has the preposterous implication that a traffic rule exists only if sufficiently many drivers obey it. In many parts of the world there are indeed strong negative correlations between drivers' behavior and the behavior mandated by certain traffic rules, as where drivers, on seeing a light turn yellow, will increase their speed. But laws such as one mandating that drivers stop at red lights are not conventions, and it was an error for Lin to bring up such laws in a discussion of conventions. More to the point are customs regarding how close vehicles can get to one another under different traffic conditions, which rarely reflect any legislation but are manifested in drivers' reactions to the behavior of other drivers (e.g., anger over an infringement of one's space). Lin's statement that 'Once the rules of using words are laid down in a speech community, the members follow them in order to communicate' wrongly suggests that linguistic conventions legislated ('rules ... are laid down'). Rather, it is because various ways of using words have proved useful in communication that conventions of using them in those ways spread through a community; a case in point is the rapid spread among speakers of English since about

1960 of the use of *hopefully* in sentence-initial position with the meaning 'Let's hope'.[9]

## 5. FANTASIES ABOUT LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The linguistic literature contains distressingly many unsupported statements about what children do or do not do, or can or cannot do, in the course of language acquisition. Lin is quite right to criticize Chomsky's blithe statements that children 'unerringly' assign correct interpretations to sentences as in (5):

(5)a. John is too stubborn to talk to Bill. (Lin's (3))
b. John is too stubborn to talk to. (Lin's (4))

Even under the Chomskyan assumption that children's brains are hardwired so as to allow for only a very limited range of syntactic structures and associated aspects of semantic interpretation, there would still be nontrivial prerequisites for assigning 'correct' interpretations to (5a–b). For example, the child would have to have correctly identified the syntactic category and at least part of the meaning of the various words, so as to be able to fit them into the syntactic structure that allegedly determines the interpretation. That is in fact quite a substantial prerequisite; note that here it involves drawing the correct syntactic and semantic distinctions between the *too* of *too stubborn* and the *to* of *talk to*, both pronounced [tu:].

Lin is overly hasty in claiming that 'If children do make mistakes in such cases, then there will be little ground for Chomsky's claim that children's knowledge of how to interpret [(5) and two other sentences] is "knowledge without experience" ' and that 'It will also mean that children do use analogy and generalisation when interpreting' those sentences. To draw the first inference, one would have to identify the source of the error, which could well be something extraneous to the innate knowledge that Chomsky claims that children have, e.g., it could be the result of their having assigned the wrong meaning or the wrong category to one of the words and then interpreted the result in terms of innate knowledge that is appropriate to that understanding of the words.[10] More importantly, Lin would in any event need to supply considerable substance to his barely articulated sketch of language acquisition before he would be entitled to infer that particular acquisition data show that 'children do use analogy and generalisation' when interpreting the sentences in question: a theory first has to exist before any data can possibly provide confirmation of it.[11]

## 6. RED HERRINGS

A large part of Lin's paper is concerned with red herrings, some of his own creation, some which he has taken over from Chomsky, many of which he deals with as if they represented serious issues and not mere wastes of the reader's time.[12] I will take up some of these non-issues in this section. The order in which they are dealt with here is of no more significance than the questions themselves.

(i) Lin and Chomsky both frequently equivocate between the mass and count senses of certain nouns (saying 'language' when they mean 'a language', or vice versa), an equivocation that is particularly pernicious in the case of the noun *language*, making much of what Lin says under the heading 'Defining language' (section 2.4) irrelevant to its putative subject matter. The quotations from Dummett, Lewis, and Chomsky that appear early in that section are claims as to what a language is, not as to what language is. The Dummett and Lewis quotations do have some bearing on what language is, but the quotation from Chomsky has to do only with the individuation of languages (i.e., what counts as instances of the same language rather than of different languages). The Chomsky quotation contains a howler that it is hard to believe that Chomsky (who presumably corrected the proofs of his 1986 book) could have allowed to get into print: 'Rather, all scientific approaches have simply abandoned these elements of what is called "language" in common usage' (Chomsky 1986, 15). The elements to which he refers (the social and political factors that have resulted in the practice of e.g., speaking of Cantonese and Mandarin as dialects of 'Chinese' even though they are as different as Spanish and French) have to do not with what is called 'language' in common usage but with what is called 'a language'.

Equally deplorable is the frequent equivocation by philosophers and linguists between the count and mass senses of 'grammar', as where Lin paraphrases Chomsky as holding that '... there is a universal grammar (UG) in a person's mind'. It is a vast step from the plausible and fairly well supported proposition that there is universal grammar to the proposition that there is a universal grammar, since no amount of grammar will necessarily add up to a grammar, i.e., something that specifies what is and what isn't allowed in some language. It is quite difficult even to interpret the sentence 'there is a universal grammar' so as to make it express anything but a blatant falsehood.

(ii) Lin cites Chomsky's (1988, 9) argument that, because a person can lose the ability to speak and understand a language without losing his knowledge of the language, as in the case of a speaker of English who

is rendered temporally unable to speak and understand English due to an injury but regains those abilities as he recovers from the injury, knowledge of a language cannot be 'practical knowledge'. That banal observation has nothing to do with whether knowledge of a language is 'practical knowledge', since in that respect, the ability to speak and understand a language is no different from such uncontroversial practical abilities as those of riding a bicycle, typing, or playing the piano.

(iii) In discussing Chomsky's claim that children correctly interpret various complex sentences 'without training or relevant experience', Lin does not ask (nor does Chomsky) what experience might be relevant to the interpretation of such sentences as (6a–b)

(6)a. I wonder who [the men expected to see them]. (Lin's (6))
b. The men expected to see them. (Lin's (7))

Interpreting a sentence involves identifying semantic roles of its various parts, the covert parts as well as the overt ones, and one kind of experience, namely linguistic experience, is a prerequisite to the assignment of a syntactic role to the *who* of (6a) and of an understood subject to the dependent verb *see* in (6b). The fact that children do not give (6a) an interpretation parallel to that of (6b) is not the awe-inspiring feat that Chomsky makes it out to be, since if *see* in (6a) were interpreted as having (as it does in (6b)) an understood subject referring to *the men*, there would be no semantic role available to assign to *who*.[13] The prior experience of learning that interrogative expressions at the beginning of an interrogative clause have a syntactic and semantic role within that clause is relevant to a child's being able to interpret *who* in (6a) as the subject of *see*. If *who* has that role, nothing else (such as the 'PRO' subject in (6b)) can have it.

(iv) Lin quotes a passage in which Chomsky (1975, 57) speaks of 'structure dependence' as if it were a property unique to language; however, as Simon (1962) convincingly argues, structure dependence is to be expected in any cognitive domain that involves complex cognitive objects. Music is one obvious cognitive domain in which perception operates in terms of structures rather than atoms, e.g., musical phrases are heard as phrases rather than just as sequences of notes, and as repetitions and transformations of other phrases. Chomsky's statement that 'For a mind differently constituted, structure-independent rules would be far superior, in that they require no abstract analysis of a sentence beyond words' reflects no serious attempt on his part to design such a mind; Simon's argument suggests that such a mind would be seriously handicapped in dealing with complex cognitive entities.

(v) Lin's remarks about sentences of intermediate degrees of acceptability (such as *This is the book which reading would be fun*) make me wonder whether he has misinterpreted a set of empirical problems for a linguist as problems of prescriptive grammar. It is not clear what the point is of his statement that 'usually there are ways of rephrasing such "abnormal" sentences, using other sentences whose grammaticality is not in doubt'. Why would it matter whether that is the case on his or Chomsky's or anybody else's view of what languages are and how they work?[14] Still more puzzling is his statement that 'it is rarely the case that grammar rules have to be amended in order to eliminate "abnormal" sentences'. Lin gives no clue as to what would be a situation in which 'grammar rules have to be amended', or what sort of 'amendment' he has in mind. But whatever it is that he has in mind, the linguistic fact of life remains that the various sentences that he calls 'abnormal' have intermediate degrees of acceptability, and the question of what it is that lowers or raises the acceptability of various sentences remains of inherent interest.

(vi) Lin's ubiquitous confusion between 'language' and 'a language' resurfaces in his final section, where he equivocates between 'intuitions about one's language' (e.g., judgments of the acceptability of a sentence and of details of its interpretation) and 'intuitions about language' such as 'that a language is a social phenomenon, that it is used for communication'. The former kind of intuitions are linguistic data, facts that provide evidence as to the knowledge that is reflected in linguistic behavior. The latter kind are not linguistic but anthropological data, i.e., data about the ideologies that are prevalent in a given culture. Human beings are just as prone to develop daft ideas about language as about the stars, the weather, and money.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

Lin's paper shows only a dim appreciation of how formidable the tasks are of developing a theory of what a speaker of a given language knows and of developing a theory of how that knowledge is acquired, and has set himself distressingly low standards of explicitness and thoroughness in constructing such theories.

While Lin sets himself up as an opponent of 'universal grammar', his proposal that 'All human languages consist of words and sentence frames' is not an alternative to the proposal that there is such a thing as 'universal grammar' but a variant of it, albeit one that posits considerably less universal grammar than does Chomsky's conception of languages. It embodies a claim as to what kinds of units and configurations of those units can

constitute a human language (or at least, it will as soon as Lin resolves the massive indeterminacies in his claim), and it raises the same question that any other proposed universals of human language do, namely, what is it that is responsible for the universality of such a framework for languages? As with any other proposal of language universals, the possible answers to this question involve the same range of possible divisions of labor between mechanisms for learning that are not specific to language and parts of human beings' biological makeup that are dedicated to language.

## NOTES

[1] In this commentary, I will charitably take 'general' in 'general learning mechanisms' to mean 'not restricted to particular domains', ignoring a far less plausible interpretation ('responsible for all learning') that, in virtue of the plural 'mechanisms', is presumably not intended by Lin. Only with the former interpretation can one avoid begging the very important question: what is the division of labor between learning mechanisms that are restricted to particular domains and those that are not so restricted?

[2] Likewise, to evaluate Chomsky's (1988, 48) statement that 'It is, in fact, doubtful that "generaI learning mechanisms", if they exist, play a major part in the growth of our systems of knowledge and belief about the world in which we live – our cognitive Systems', one would need to bring in some hypotheses as to what 'general learning mechanisms' exist and ask what role they might play in the growth of human cognitive systems. It is not at all difficult to hypothesize learning mechanisms that could plausibly play major roles in the growth of diverse kinds of human knowledge, including linguistic knowledge, e.g., mechanisms for the acquisition of categories organized around prototypes (cf. Lakoff 1986) or for the assignment of structure to complex entities in terms of constituency and of dependency (cf. Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1983) on constituency and dependency as figuring centrally in musical cognition).

[3] In McCawley (1983), I sketch an approach to language acquisition in which much of what is specific to language in a child's innate learning mechanisms is a specification of what factors the child's general learning mechanisms (such as mechanisms for forming categories and for assigning structures to complex entities) should pay attention to.

[4] 'Should' may be an error for 'can': surely Lin does not want to exclude the possibility of there being two or more frames that specify different ways than a given word can be used.

[5] Lin's one allusion to such a derivational process ('we can derive "Do you miss somebody?" from "You miss somebody") leaves unclear whether what he has in mind can have the generality of a GPSG metarule. He says, 'But all this is explicitly known', but gives the reader no clue as to what it is that he regards as 'explicitly known' or of how a child would acquire such derivational processes via general learning mechanisms. His sole illustration of derivation of one sentence frame from another involves a peculiarity of English (the use of *do* in positions that require an auxiliary verb, if no auxiliary verb is otherwise present) whose relationship to his analytic scheme is totally unclear. The relevant metarule of Gazdar et al. (1985, 62) derives from each rule for a finite verb phrase a rule for corresponding clauses with 'subject-auxiliary inversion'.

[6] Such an analysis was first proposed by Jespersen (1913). It is perhaps because of the baroquely opaque version of it that Lin quotes from Chomsky 1986 that he fails to see the motivation for the embedded sentence.

[7] Since the earliest work in generative grammar that Lin cites is Chomsky (1975), he may mean by 'surface structure' what Chomsky in subsequent works calls '*S*-structure', a supposed structural level that differs from 'surface structure' in containing numerous phonetically (and often also semantically) empty elements, organized into the sorts of configurations demanded by whatever version of '*X*-bar syntax' is current; if so, the word 'mysterious' is appropriate. I remain puzzled, though, that Lin does not make use of the ordinary linguistic sense of 'surface structure': a syntactic structure consisting of the morphemes that figure in the pronunciation of the sentence, in the order in which they are pronounced, and grouped into the larger units that are potentially relevant to the pronunciation of the sentence.

[8] Or at least, that is true for a sentence frame that specifies a possible form for a sentence; recall my uncertainty as to whether Lin intends 'sentence frame' to take in rules for syntactic units of categories other than 'sentence'.

[9] On mechanisms for the origin and spread of conventions in a linguistic community, see Keller 1994.

[10] The knowledge here is of course 'beyond experience' but not 'without experience': a child's correct or incorrect understanding of (5a–b) would depend on its prior linguistic experience.

[11] For an extremely perceptive and detailed critical overview of the possible interpretations of linguistic errors made by children in experimental tasks, and of the design and execution of such experiments, see Cram and Thornton 1998.

[12] Lin is not completely derelict in his duty to dispel rather than perpetuate red herrings: he correctly observes (his note 7) that Searle's statement (1972) that 'The purpose of language is communication' makes the pointless assumption that language has only one purpose. For the points that Searle and Lin make, it is sufficient that communication be a major function of language, irrespective of what other functions it may have.

[13] The argument that a learner would be led astray if he interpreted the bracketed part of (6a) on the model of (6b) is a fine objection to any 'analogical' theory of language acquisition that required that particular analogy figure in language acquisition and that anything learned by analogy be immune from revision or rejection. However, neither Lin nor Chomsky has cited any theory of language acquisition that has either of those two implausible characteristics. The challenge that the interpretation of *them* in (6a–b) presents to advocates of analogy in language acquisition could be met by providing an account of the acquisition of pronoun interpretation that would successfully terminate before any need to invoke the (6a)/(6b) analogy.

[14] Languages in fact often allow their speakers to paint themselves into a linguistic corner. Hetzron (1975) gives a particularly interesting compilation of such cases; for example, there is no Russian translation of 'I entered the post office', because the verb for 'enter' requires the preposition *v* and the noun for 'post office' requires the preposition *na*. An obligatory rule may be sensitive to information that in a given case is indeterminate; for example, when a subject is indeterminate with regard to person or number (*you or I; Bill or his brothers*), it is not clear how a rule requiring a predicate element to agree in person and number with its subject would apply. Languages often develop 'patches' (Morgan 1972; McCawley 1998, section 22c) to resolve the indeterminacy, e.g., a convention of pooling

the referents of the disjuncts (as in German, where *du oder ich* is treated as 1st person plural) or by making the verb agree with the closer disjunct.

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