Skeptical Linguistic Essays
Chapter 9 Junk Ethics 1: Advances in Linguistic Rhetoric

Linguistics can be hard work. The attempt to develop insightful descriptions or theories of NLs can be extraordinarily taxing to the mind/brain. Almost every day another promising linguist keels over from the strain of marshalling facts, drawing distinctions, and postulating entities. Reliable techniques for stress reduction and lifestyle management are thus an urgent necessity for the linguistics community. It is toward the goal of meeting this need that attention is turned in the following remarks.

How can linguists successfully struggle against those who, like hungry vultures, hover ready to criticize, counterexemplify, refute? The answer is rhetoric, the art of convincing one's audience without benefit of logic. (More accurately, regardless of logic. No one has shown that it is actually disadvantageous to have a sound argument on one's side; it is merely unnecessary in linguistics, I will argue.)

Great strides are being made in linguistic rhetoric, whose progress puts the stasis in mere description and theorizing to shame. In the great rhetoric laboratories of the north-eastern United States, defensive shields are being perfected that can render any theory virtually impervious to factual corrosion.

Moreover, essentially no risk attaches to the rhetorical techniques reviewed here. Each one simply generalizes techniques already effectively used by leading (often tenured) linguistics practitioners and published in top linguistics journals or in books by reputable international publishers. The only contribution of the guide offered here is to codify and publicize already developed methods so that they can be utilized by the broad mass of the overburdened linguistic work force, and not just by an elite few.

Let us begin with a familiar problem. You have a desired consequence that explains your data just right but face the demanding, perhaps impossible task of showing that it is a consequence of your general linguistic theory. Ideally, you would like a proof; but such are very hard to construct, and call for a degree of explicitness that makes one go queasy just thinking about it. The solution? Simply assert. Nothing could be easier than simply saying that the desired consequence follows from your theory without giving any proof.

Risky? Disreputable? Hard to get away with? Not at all. This procedure, *the Phantom Theorem Move*, has worked for others, and *it can for you too*. For example, Chomsky and Lasnik (1977: 453) assert that a

generalization about the distribution of subject extraction follows from something called trace theory (don't ask; it's not called trace theory now). It doesn't, of course (Postal, 1982). But no one questions Chomsky and Lasnik's result on this score, or demands a proof. They have asserted it aggressively; that is enough.

In any case, if anyone had exhibited the bad taste to question the claimed consequence, nothing would have been simpler for the authors than to accuse the complainer of *naive falsificationism* (Koster, 1978, 566), or, even more effectively, simply to ignore them.

Advanced players should be aware of an even bolder move. This takes the unproven assertion that one's factual generalization follows from one's theory and appends a disarming admission that one has no proof of this logical connection, or (most daring of all), an admission that no proof of such a connection is even possible. Although this may sound outrageous and unfeasible, it has already worked perfectly well, as in the following much-admired piece of daredevil rhetoric :

(1) Freidin (1978: 539)

"By taking (54a-e) as axioms of the theory of grammar, we derive the empirical effects of the strict cycle as a theorem."
[Footnote 26] This is not to say that we have a formal proof; clearly we do not. In fact, it seems unlikely at this point that a formal proof can be constructed."

One strength of this sophisticated bluff is that it provides quite an effective defense against any claims of trying to fool anyone. If accused of having no proof or argument that the theory entails the claim made, one replies: "Of course not. I said that quite explicitly on page 539; can my critic have failed to note that I said very clearly in footnote 26 that I don't even believe one is possible?" (Instant collapse of logic-chopping opponent. How can anyone so forthright be questioned further?)

Another sophisticated ploy for similar situations is *the Phantom Reference Move*. Under this procedure, one sketches a *portion* of an argument which apparently would show that one's theory does entail one's linguistic claim. One then stipulates that only with *further* assumptions does the argument really go through (the latter of course not being specified). One then adds the equivalent of "see below", but without giving any page, section or even chapter references. A fine example is provided in (2)

(2) Chomsky (1981: 125)

"Plainly (24) is closely related to 2.6.(40), and a more general formulation is possible including as well ergative verbs that assign no Case to their object and no 0-role to their subjects ... I will return directly to some tacit assumptions that are required for this argument to go through in full generality. Let us assume now that these gaps can be filled."

This procedure is maximally effective when performed on an early page of a reasonably long work. Research indicates that those actually willing to scan through dozens, still less hundreds, of pages to determine whether you actually give these "further assumptions", and if so where, and even *try* to show anything follows from them, are fewer than those sending the IRS unsolicited letters claiming they owe *more* income tax than they have been assessed for.

If showing facts follow from some principle is tedious, no less fatiguing is creating a principle in the first place. Fortunately, although often overlooked, the health-stressing activity of principle formulation is superfluous in theoretical linguistics. One need only propose some name N which sounds as if it could well be the designation of a linguistic principle.

To appear serious, of course, one should avoid principle names like 'Rumplestiltskin' or 'Debby Does Dallas'. Select something like 'he Contraction Determination Condition' or 'Recoverability'. The procedure is then simply to assert that whatever facts you want follow from the principle of which N is the name. The charm of this strategy, normally called *the Phantom Principle Move*, is that nobody can ever show that the facts do not follow from N. And if the claim that they follow is not false, it must, according to propositional logic, be true.

As before, an advanced version is available: append to your principle (say P) an explicit claim that you have not formulated P. Then announce forcefully that this does not matter since, of course, we *know* that P must exist, perhaps because, e.g., children could not possibly learn the facts that follow (see above) from the principle. To quote again from a rhetorical masterpiece:

(3) Chomsky and Lasnik (1977, 446-7)

"We assume that this possibility is excluded by the recoverability principle for deletion. Exactly how to formulate this principle is a nontrivial question, but there is little doubt that such a principle is required".

Tests have shown that invocation of moves like these will prevent all but the really self-destructive from trying to hassle you about the content of P.

Moreover, the efficacy of such moves is long-lasting and stable over time. Thus Riemsdijk and Williams (1986: 103) appeal to the same phantom recoverability principle as Chomsky and Lasnik (19771): "The principle for recoverability that would allow this deletion remains to be given, but it is plausible to assume . ." [plausible assumption omitted]. Nine years have elapsed, and the phantom principle remains unformulated. I see no reason why the situation will be different nine years from now, or ever. [1] Hence there are grounds for believing that the procedures surveyed in this article can remain applicable over unlimited time periods.

A recurrent problem faced by the working linguist is to find something to say justifying his/her own treatment of some data and dismissing an opposing view. Substantive or logical arguments in favor of one's own and/or against the competition are useful, but not easily found. No matter. If, as is here recommended, one has the good judgement to adopt views entirely within the current mainstream, one can always appeal for these purposes to the ever-effective *Social Conformity Move*. This is based on implying, possibly even truthfully, that one's opponent's views are incompatible with generally accepted wisdom, while one's own are highly conformist. A good and typical example is found in (4), where it functions effectively in lieu of a substantive criticism of a proposal about Georgian by Alice Harris:

(4) Anderson (1984: 182)

"As a result, the formulation of Inversion becomes global in character (since it must refer simultaneously to the fact that a given argument is a subject, and to the fact that it was initially a subject), a consequence which most views of syntax would reject."

This kind of stuff can only leave your opponent whining impotently about not all popular ideas being true, an outsider's complaint which will rarely cut any ice in or out of linguistics.

Once effective use is made of the devices discussed in the foregoing paragraphs, linguistic life quickly becomes much less taxing. But things are better yet; current linguistic rhetorical ingenuity offers many further aids. Suppose, for example, you have impulsively made public some description which could (because the described NL actually exists) conceivably be wrong. This might cause work if some negatively oriented, untheoretical linguist were to develop some evidence or argument against your description. To protect yourself against this kind of irrational hostility, you should have already published an item, easily composable on a plane flight, which contains your "philosophy of linguistics". This can say, inter alia, and very humbly: "Of course, a description may be wrong. In fact, we *hope* that our descriptions will be wrong." Thus:

(5) Koster (1978: 566):

"Interesting theories do not avoid conflicts with the data but rather create clashes on purpose."

Note also the following exhibition of a positive lust for error

(6) Chomsky 1982: 76):

"Suppose that counterevidence is discovered - as we should expect and as we should in fact hope, since precisely this eventuality will offer the possibility of a deeper understanding of the real principles involved."

And in the same vein, one find:

(6) Riemsdijk and Williams (1986: 320)
". . . but this is exactly what one wants of a strong proposal: that it lead immediately to a great deal of empirical difficulty".

The rhetorical strategy these expressions of yearning for counterevidence implement is, of course, the cunning *Epistemology of Desired Error move*, which enables you to cover all the bases. If the description you have offered turns out to be right, you claim the credit and, naturally, squelch the critic for inadequate criticism. But if your description is wrong, as the critic claims, and you are somehow forced to admit it, you

just say: “Of course. It is exactly as we should hope. After all, linguistics is a living field.” (Upwardly mobile students should practice this several times daily, staring into a mirror with a took of utter conviction and sincerity.)

Again, suppose you are an advocate of some popular linguistic theory and are working on an exotic NL (one not used by European settlers of the thirteen American colonies) and you uncover a neat analysis of some sentences that is unfortunately inconsistent with some principle of the linguistic theory of which you are a vocal defender. This could, unpleasantly, force you to think about which to give up: (i) the theoretical principle, (ii) the analysis, or, boldly, (iii) logic. Obviously, (i) could annoy the many, often illiberal, defenders of the theory; (ii) would waste a lot of your time; and (iii), although not to be excluded a priori, is going to raise some eyebrows even in linguistics.

Happily, there are alternatives. Instead of getting rid of any of (i)-(iii), you can simply say that A only violates the letter of the principle but not its spirit. Too desperate even for linguistics'? Not at all. The technique involved, called *the Sophisticated Interpretation Move*, has already been successfully introduced and tested:

(7) Burzio (1986: 48):

“Two points can be made regarding the analysis in (70). The first is that such an analysis violates more the letter than the spirit of the projection principle.”

Since you are as well-equipped as anyone to know what the spirit of the crucial principle is (I assume, as recommended above, that the principle has not actually been stated), nobody is going to give you any trouble on this point. Extensive testing indicates that no one will ever say that the analysis must be rejected because it really does violate P's spirit. It simply is not that easy working with principle spirits. Hence you can keep your pleasing analysis, not annoy the peer-group that espouses and protects your chosen theory - and not even have to get rid of logic.

Even better, you can now say that your analysis supports the spirit of the theoretical principle, thereby actually pleasing the peer group. It is best to leave it a little vague as to how your analysis supports the spirit of the relevant principle; in particular, you should neither assert nor deny that it does this just by being inconsistent with its letter.

Another exhausting problem an advocate of a theory can face is writing a concluding chapter to, e.g., a book about some NL using some theory (or conversely). A good quick way to end, and one sure to be popular with the theory's support group, is to say your work on the designated NL has confirmed some of its principles. At the end, it is better to say "confirmed P" than "confirmed the spirit of P", since it sounds more scientific. Luckily, research reveals that many health conscious linguists, seeking to reduce reading stress, look only at concluding chapters, so that this will conveniently provide such readers with a solid and non-spiritual dose of the assurance they seek.

People tend to think you can only say that work on some NL has confirmed a given theory by showing that some facts actually follow from it.. Fortunately, given the Phantom Theorem move discussed above, you can always confidently say this, and, given the Phantom Principle move, you always have some trouble-free principle to say it about.

But things are even better: you can also say your work confirms some principle of a desired theory if that work supports an analysis of the facts that is in fact inconsistent with that principle. As already seen, the analysis could confirm the principle's spirit, given the Sophisticated Interpretation Move. Further, after all, if it weren't for the principle, you never would have been able to notice that the analysis was incompatible with it, and nobody would have realized how important the analysis was. What could confirm a principle more than that? Naturally, then, one finds Burzio (1986: 437) concluding, despite the earlier admission that his analysis was incompatible with the Projection Principle: "Some of the above will in turn confirm the correctness of the projection principle." Some of it certainly will, given accepted standards in the field. Confirmation comes in many forms, after all, and warm words of support for the spirit must surely count for something.

One of the truly annoying and tiring things in linguistics is that other linguists often act as if they had a right to disagree with you, even about matters that should be quite obvious to them. For example, you may have been saying for a long time that some concept, say "subject of", has to be defined terms of the theory, and still somebody might have the temerity to suppose that the relevant ideas or ones pretty like them are primitive terms. You could try to give some arguments that they are not, but formulating arguments is exactly the sort of thing that migraine specialists warn against; besides, the average linguist probably would not be able to follow the sophisticated and robust argumentation that would be necessary. Anyway, how

much time can you be expected to spend on such basic points? The only reasonable procedure in such cases is to formulate a methodological principle that simply makes it illicit for the concept concerned to be primitive, as in (8)

(8) Chomsky (1981: 10):
"But it would be unreasonable to incorporate, for example, such notions as "subject of a sentence" or other grammatical relations within the class of primitive notions, since it is unreasonable to suppose that these notions can be directly applied to linguistically unanalyzed data."

Of course, you don't have to, and should not, allow the methodological principle to constrain your own choice of future primitives if it is inconvenient. This is illustrated, in a passage within thirty pages of (8):

(9) Chomsky (1981: 37):
"We can bring subcategorization and 0-marking together more closely by inventing a new 0-role, call it #, for non-arguments that are subcategorized by heads, e.g. advantage in 'take advantage of'."

Is one to suppose that the notion 'bears the 0-role *' "can be directly applied to linguistically unanalyzed data" in a way that subject cannot? Hardly, but no upwardly mobile linguist will raise the question provided that several pages of text have intervened since the methodological principle was introduced and used to exorcize evil assumptions. Trust me; its power will never rebound against the user.

Nor need you worry that most primitives you yourself have appealed to before springing the new methodology violate it just as much as, e.g., # does, because the aim of introducing a new methodological principle is to prevent a lot of well-intentioned people from mistakenly wasting their time worrying about whether the given concepts are primitive or not. Why should you follow such an irritatingly restrictive methodology when you are yourself in no danger of this kind of pointless activity? It would be like a grown-up being forbidden to speak to strangers on the way to the corner store.

A delicate point in the search for a less stressful linguistic existence is reached when it becomes necessary to incorporate in your work ideas already advanced by individuals who have mostly wrong assumptions and mislead a lot of gullible people. It would be a serious error to actually cite them or give them any credit, which could only increase their credibility and hence their ability to lead others astray in the many domains

(most, no doubt) in which their ideas remain misguided and objectionable. For example, suppose some proponent, like McCawley, of the unquestionably wrong and stupid Basic Semantics (BS)- movement has, accidentally, hit on one or two ideas you need to use, say, hypothetically, the notion that surface quantifiers are connected to logic-like representations by transformational movement operations sensitive to syntactic constraints, or something like that.

When adopting this idea, assuming that you wish to do so, it would be an obvious rhetorical error to cite any proponents of BS. Not only would this waste a lot of serious linguists' time if they were persuaded to actually read such misguided stuff, it might mislead less sophisticated thinkers than you into thinking something about BS was right. So the correct procedure is to proclaim and get others to proclaim, over a long period, many times, that BS is totally wrong, misguided, unscientific, etc. Then, quietly, simply use whatever BS ideas you want without warning and without any tiring citational or attributional material. A well-known principle of scholarly law known as Right of Salvage guarantees that you cannot be held accountable for this. This principle determines that one need not make attributions to theoretical traditions already "generally established as stupid and not part of rational inquiry . . ."

There are many other topics which should be discussed in a treatment of the present subject matter. A fuller account would cover rhetorical moves that are best suited to live verbal interaction, in conference question sessions or similar environments - moves like the Argument From Bravery ("Look, so-and-so may be wrong, but at least he has a theory"), and the Argument From Notoriety ("Oh, those facts about nonrestrictive relatives are notorious" - i.e., my theory does not have to be compatible with them). But space constraints prevent our treating here such topics as the beautiful Psychic Alternation Move ("This criticism of A's claim is not valid, because although A admittedly made the claim, he could easily have made a different, correct claim instead") which must await another occasion.

I would also have wished to cover the black art of refereemanship, where even the minimal constraints imposed on scholars by the fact that their names will be publicly seen above their words are absent. Here truth counts for little, and rhetoric holds sway; see Chapter 10.

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1 The prediction here, made in 1988, was quite accurate. As shown in Chapter 12, note 10, the same move was instantiated in 1995.