

Remarks on Recursive Misrepresentations by Legate et al (2013)

Christina Behme

Christina.Behme@dal.ca

1. Introduction

The term biolinguistics was coined decades ago, yet, much of the work done in the Chomskyan framework continues to be focused exclusively on non-biological linguistics. And little, if any, work in the biological sciences concerns language-specific genes or brain structures. Seeing the need for action, psychologist Marc Hauser, “bio” linguist Noam Chomsky, and biologist Tecumseh Fitch published a landmark paper in *Science* “to promote a stronger connection between biology and linguistics ...[and] to clarify the biolinguistic perspective on language and its evolution” (Hauser, Chomsky, & Fitch, 2002, 1570). They proposed a conceptual distinction between two senses of the faculty of language, broad and narrow (FLB/FLN). Only FLN is specific to language and to the human species. It “is the abstract linguistic computational system alone, independent of the other systems with which it interacts and interfaces. ... The core property of FLN is recursion... it takes a finite set of elements and yields a potentially infinite array of discrete expressions” (Hauser, Chomsky, & Fitch, 2002, p. 1571). In a follow-up paper they reiterated that the “terminological distinction between FLN and FLB is intended to help clarify misunderstandings and aid interdisciplinary rapprochement” (Fitch, Hauser, & Chomsky, 2005, 179), and expressed “hope that research into the biology and evolution of language will not continue to be mired down by the misunderstandings that have so long plagued this field” (Fitch, Hauser, & Chomsky, 2005, 206).

Both papers received considerable attention but they did not eliminate or even reduce misunderstandings. The field remains so far from mutual agreement about the aim of (bio)linguistic research, that it has been proposed that researchers should agree to disagree: “These then are simply different enterprises – Chomsky is concerned with the nature of recursive thought capacities, whereas linguistic typology and the non-generative linguists are concerned with what external language behavior indicates about the nature of cognition and its evolution” (Evans & Levinson, 2009, 477). This proposal has been rejected by at least some Chomskyans, and their debating style has become increasingly acrimonious (e.g., Pesetsky, 2009; Freidin, 2009; Nevins et al., 2007/2009; Hornstein, 2012, 2013; Pesetsky, 2013a). In this brief comment I analyze the most recent contribution to the recursion dispute (Legate et al., 2013), and argue that it is difficult to maintain that these Chomskyan biolinguists merely misunderstand the other side.

2. Misrepresentation of what?

Stephen Levinson published a short report with the unremarkable title *Recursion in pragmatics*. He intended “to clarify that there is *one* central sense of the term recursion—namely embedding ... —that clearly is not exclusive to syntax, and that is exhibited in a much more fulsome way outside of sentential syntax” (Levinson, 2013, 149, emphasis

added). Apparently, Levinson failed to achieve the goal to clarify, and his report elicited a very hostile response¹, titled *Recursive Misrepresentation*² (Legate et al., 2013).

Seemingly, much of the hostility has been caused by the claim “that there is little evidence that unlimited recursion, understood as center-embedding, is typical of natural language syntax” (Levinson, 2013, 149). This claim has been taken as “presumption that center-embedding can stand proxy for embedding (and clausal embedding can stand proxy for recursion)” (Legate et al. 2013, 2). This would highlight a gross misunderstanding, but there is no reason to attribute such misunderstanding to Levinson. He clearly states that he is discussing *one sense of the term recursion*, and he justifies throughout why he is interested specifically in center-embedding.

Why, then, would Legate et al. accuse Levinson of misrepresentation? They claim that Levinson’s focus on center-embeddings is unjustified because “... center-embedding enjoys no special pride of place in linguistic analysis, but is just one of many phenomena that can demonstrate clausal subordination in the languages of the world” (Legate et al., 2013, 9). This is a surprising claim. One of the few points of agreement between Chomskyans and non-Chomskyans (e.g., Chomsky, 2009b, 2012; Christiansen & Chater, 1999, Elman, 1991) is that center-embeddings *are* of special importance for human language. Levinson discusses in detail the implications of center-embeddings for placement of a language on the Chomsky hierarchy (pp. 149-151). Further, Chomsky’s

¹ Legate et al (2013) was celebrated and compared to the “evisceration” of Everett (2005) by Nevins et al. (2007/2009) on a biolinguistic blog that is “partly a labor of hate” (Hornstein, 2012/2013).

² Levinson (2013) contains several inaccuracies and ambiguities. However, they are not subject of this note because they pale in comparison to the misrepresentations, mischaracterizations, and double standards that make the title of Legate et al. (2013) mostly self-referential.

co-authors reported that non-human primates (cotton-top tamarins (*Saguinus oedipus*)) can be trained to learn a finite state grammar $(AB)^n$, but not the corresponding phrase structure grammar $A^n B^n$. “The $A^n B^n$ grammar produces center-embedded constructions that [are] less common in human language than other (e.g., right-branching) structures” (Fitch & Hauser, 2004, 378). Finally, it has been documented that many speakers find multiple center-embeddings difficult to understand, and tend to consider them to be ungrammatical (de Vries et al., 2011). Unlike Legate et al., these researchers hold that the presence of center-embeddings is an important indicator that can help to distinguish human languages from animal communication systems, and to reveal limits of human cognition. Given that evidence from formal grammar theory and research on non-human primates and human speakers suggest that center-embeddings play a special role in human language, it seems justified that Levinson focuses on them.

3. Insufficient Evidence?

Legate et al. (2013) claim Levinson makes mostly unsupported or insufficiently supported assertions: “No evidence is cited for these assertions” (4), “no substantial corpora of Pirahã texts... are cited”(4), “later research on Warlpiri, uncited by L13” (5), “Strikingly, no evidence is offered” (13), “the absence of any evidence” (13), “without proper evidence” (15), “this proposal is pure speculation: an intriguing start for a future research program, but unsupported (for now) by evidence or argument” (17).

These quotes suggest that Legate et al. consider it problematic for a researcher to put forward proposals in print that are not supported by (solid empirical) evidence³. One would expect this attitude from ordinary scientists, yet, according to Chomsky, science (and especially biolinguistics) follows a “Galilean style” of theorizing, mostly unimpeded by inconvenient data interference: “[Galileo] dismissed a lot of data; he was willing to say: ‘Look, if the data refute the theory, the data are probably wrong.’ And the data that he threw out were not minor” (Chomsky, 2002, 98). Data-dismissal has been advocated numerous times in Chomsky’s publications, culminating in the argument from the Norman Conquest: “... if you want to study distinctive properties of language - what really makes it different from the digestive system ... you’re going to abstract away from the Norman Conquest. But *that means abstracting away from the whole mass of data* that interests the linguist who wants to work on a particular language” (Chomsky, 2012, 84, emphasis added).

To my knowledge, Legate et al. have never objected to the “Galilean style”. And, according to Chomsky, this style is not idiosyncratic to his own work but was accepted by famous scientists (e.g., Copernicus, Newton, Einstein, Monod) and “is pretty much the way science often seems to work. ... You just see that some ideas simply look right, and then you sort of put aside the data that refute them” (Chomsky, 2009a, 36).

³ For the following discussion it is irrelevant whether Levinson provided insufficient evidence for any of his proposals. For argument’s sake I assume the strongest possible case for Legate et al. (that Levinson is guilty as charged). I am not suggesting that the strongest case actually holds. Levinson (2013) was a short report and it would need to be established that the claims he made are not supported by evidence reported elsewhere (e.g., in the literature he cited).

Given Chomsky's assertion (unchallenged by Legate et al.) that scientists "just see" that some ideas look right and "put aside" data that refute them, Levinson's approach would be good Galilean science. He proposed (P1): "Linguistic typologists are well aware of many languages that show little evidence of indefinite embedding" (Levinson, 2013, 151), and provided examples of languages which support P1.

Legate et al. object to several specific claims about these languages, and cite evidence that Levinson either did not discuss or interpreted differently. For example, they object to the claim that Warlpiri is a language lacking evidence of indefinite recursion because "later research on Warlpiri, uncited by L13, offers clear examples of clausal embedding" (Legate et al., 2013, 5). Assuming this is correct, Levinson would be doing legitimate "Galilean" science: after proposing P1 he put aside (or left uncited) evidence that refutes P1. If this is unacceptable practice for Levinson but acceptable for Chomsky, then Legate et al. must apply different standards to the work of Chomsky and Levinson⁴.

4. To use or not to use: Corpus statistics

Levinson's claim that higher degree center-embeddings are extremely rare in spoken and written texts (P2) is subjected to severe criticism as well. Levinson cites research showing that roughly 11% of embeddings are center-embeddings for European languages

⁴ It is not necessary here to discuss the other allegations of Legate et al. because the same conclusion applies to all of them. However, in several cases the interpretation of data by Levinson and Legate et al. differs. Legate et al. assume without argument that only their own interpretation of the data could be correct.

(Karlsson, 2007), and even less than that for polysynthetic languages (Mithun, 1984). In all languages, only a very small portion of recorded center-embeddings are higher degree center-embeddings: “the psycholinguistic findings and the corpus findings converge: after degree 2 embedding, performance rapidly degrades to a point where degree 3 embeddings hardly occur” (Levinson, 2013, 154). Even though P2 appears well supported, Legate et al. object. The argument they offer reveals again the double standards evident throughout their article.

Legate et al. criticize Levinson’s use of Karlsson (2007) data because “Corpus statistics ... must always be evaluated against a baseline, before concluding that the relative rarity of a given phenomenon requires special explanation. Neither L13 nor Karlsson provides such an evaluation” (Legate et al., 2013, 10). One is surprised to read such criticism by linguists closely allied with Chomsky, who abhors any work involving corpus linguistics: “If you want to get a grant, what you say is ‘I want to do corpus linguistics’ - collect a huge mass of data and throw a computer at it, and maybe something will happen. That was given up in the hard sciences centuries ago” (Chomsky, 2012, 19). To my knowledge Legate et al. have never objected to Chomsky’s claim that the collection of a huge mass of data has been given up in the hard sciences centuries ago. Yet, in an argument directed at an intellectual opponent they cite “Bader (2012) [who] estimated the frequencies of these [= degree 2 center embeddings, CB] structures in a very large German corpus of 92 million sentences” (Ibid.). Apparently, to support an argument *against* Levinson the collection of such a huge mass of data is justified.

Setting aside the issue of double standards, Legate et al.’s argument also fails to support the conclusion that “the significance that L13 attaches to the subjective ‘rarity’ of

multiple center-embeddings is at best premature and *most likely misplaced*” (Legate et al., 2013, 11, emphasis added). Bader’s “proper assessment of quantitative data concerning embedding” (Legate et al., 2013, 10) does not challenge Levinson’s claim. He claims that degree 2 center embedding “occurs vanishingly rarely in spoken language syntax” (Levinson, 2013, 155). Bader’s corpus analysis has shown that double center-embedding “occurs at a frequency of just above 4.6 per million sentences; a figure which one might indeed be tempted to describe informally⁵ as ‘vanishingly rare’” (Legate et al., 2013, 11).

It seems that Legate et al. misinterpret Levinson’s factual claim about the low frequency of double center-embeddings as a claim about *unexpectedly* low frequency. At least this is the claim the analysis by Bader would refute: “Crucially, however, though the frequency of double center-embedding in Bader’s corpus is subjectively low, it is close to its *expected frequency* under the traditional assumption that the grammar and processing factors are independent...” (Legate et al., 2013, 11, emphasis added).

Levinson (2013) does not express surprise about the low frequency of double center-embeddings in spoken language syntax. Instead, he calls surprising the fact that even though such embeddings are rare in sentential syntax they are not rare in discourse: “We are now in a position to appreciate some very surprising facts. There are embeddings in interactive discourse that have the same basic properties exhibited in sentential syntax,

⁵ It seems difficult to conceive of a term that would be more appropriate than ‘vanishingly rare’ for this frequency. Charitably, one might assume that Legate et al. imply that vanishingly implies surprising but they provide no evidence suggesting that Levinson had such an implication in mind.

but that are distributed over two (or more speakers). But in this case there is no parallel limit on embedding— multiple embeddings seem in principle indefinite, certainly at least to degree 6” (Levinson, 2013, 154). Here Levinson expresses surprise about the fact that embeddings that have the same basic properties as those in sentential syntax are not equally limited to level 2 in interactive discourse. One may challenge this claim but the cited passage of Bader’s work would be irrelevant to such a challenge because Bader did not report any findings on interactive discourse.

5. Special Treatment – Everett 1986

Legate et al. object to Levinson’s interpretation of findings on the Amazonian language Pirahã. He suggested (P3) that Pirahã either lacks evidence for any recursive structures (Everett, 2005) or “that embedding is very limited, and at most seems capped at one level deep” (Levinson, 2013, 151). Legate et al. object to P3 because: “... an example of possible double embedding is cited in Everett’s own grammatical sketch (Everett 1986, 260, ex. 226; though with complications noted by Nevins et al. 2007, 27 fn. 38)” (Legate et al., 2013, 4).

Anyone as familiar with the recent Pirahã controversy as Legate et al. must know that Everett has explained repeatedly why he now rejects his 1986 account. Consider:

I told Chomsky in 1984...that I could find no evidence for embedding in Pirahã other than the –sai nominalizer.... It turns out that –sai has functions that overlap with nominalization but that that is not the best analysis of it. Experiments by Mike Frank and others, and the new paper by Sakel and Stapert, show this clearly. With that gone there is just no evidence for recursion in Pirahã. As often happens in field research, a minor difference in the way this or that morpheme or construction is analyzed can have profound effects on the grammar as a whole. One doesn't see all of this at first. (Everett, 2009a, 219-220)

Everett is of course not the first researcher who has changed his interpretation of data in light of new evidence. It is rather rare that a first proposal does not have to be changed when more data become available: "... the fact that [something is] the first thing that comes to mind doesn't make it true.... It is not necessarily wrong, but most first guesses are. Take a look at the history of the advanced sciences. No matter how well established they are, they almost always turned out to be wrong" (Chomsky, 2012, 38).

In the current context, two questions arise. First, why do Legate et al. never mention Everett (2009a) and other publications that defend the new interpretation of Pirahã data⁶ in Everett (2005), and, relevantly, the conclusion drawn by Levinson (2013)? Why do they fail to mention others who have confirmed this point of Levinson's analysis:

Nevins, Pesetsky, and Rodrigues (2009) show that there may be multiple clauses in a sentence. However, they do not show that clauses can contain clauses that contain clauses, that is, true recursion. And in fact the multiple clauses they cite are arguably paratactic; so what can be shown at most is that Pirahã has a simple phrase grammar, with the only further depth of embedding being the two-word NP (Jackendoff & Wittenberg, 2012, 16)

⁶ It is irrelevant for my argument whether the interpretation of Everett (2005) is correct. Legate et al. accuse Levinson of misrepresentation. Yet, he presents the most recent work by Everett correctly, and refers to the dispute about the veracity of Everett's claims. I submit that Legate et al. fail to establish that Levinson misrepresents the work on Pirahã.

Given how harshly Legate et al. criticize Levinson for not citing work that challenges his view, one would have expected that they would lead by example, and cite meticulously all work relevant to their own claims.

Second, Legate et al. are citing a claim that has been corrected subsequently by the researcher as the *only* positive evidence to challenge P3 that “that embedding is very limited, and at most seems capped at one level deep” (Levinson, 2013, 151). Further, the only example of possible double embedding in Pirahã cited by Legate et al. is in a footnote from the unpublished article by Nevins et al. (2007). This example is used to establish one more instance of Levinson’s ignorance of the literature he cites. Because researchers usually cite from published articles (e.g., Nevins et al., 2009), one would expect that Legate et al. would have explained why they think that in this case Levinson should have also consulted the unpublished version of this article. No explanation is offered⁷.

Legate et al. further criticize Levinson for making an “utterly unverified” (4) claim because he cites no substantial corpora of Pirahã texts or studies that report on attempts to elicit multiple levels of embeddings. But, Levinson refers to the data on Pirahã that *are* available at the moment. Faulting him for not citing evidence that is not available at this time is as bizarre as it would have been to fault Leif Erikson for never having provided a

⁷ The fact that one author of Legate et al. (2013), David Pesetsky, is also author of Nevins et al. (2007/2009) is noteworthy.

detailed description of Vancouver Island. Further, given that a researcher who has worked for decades on and is fluent in Pirahã has reported that this language has no embeddings, there is no compelling reason for attempting to elicit multiple levels of embedding.

Legate et al. do not reference any Pirahã data Levinson could be said to have ignored. They also do not challenge Everett's findings based on independent data showing he is mistaken. Nor do they discuss the extensive literature challenging claims made by Nevins et al. (2007/2009) (e.g. Everett 2009b, 2010, Jackendoff & Wittenberg, 2012; Oliveira and Everett, 2010; Piantadosi, Stearns, Everett, and Gibson, 2012). This literature addresses criticisms by Nevins et al., clarifies Everett's position, and refers to a number of facts about Pirahã that are predicted by Everett's analysis but not by an analysis in which Pirahã has recursion. Instead, they take sides in a currently unresolved dispute and dismiss what an expert who knows the language has reported, based on *a priori* beliefs about what he should have found⁸. Relevantly, proponents of the biolinguistic program have stressed several times in print that it is possible for a human language to lack recursion (e.g., Fitch, Hauser, Chomsky, 2005; Chomsky, 2012). Legate et al. have not objected to this claim. Hence, there is no compelling reason within their own framework to expect that Pirahã must have recursion.

⁸ The attitude towards Everett (evident also in Nevins et al. 2007/2009) could be described as a form of intellectual colonialism: the field work of another researcher is exploited in support of one's own theories, and findings that do not confirm these theories are "reinterpreted". The reinterpretation is considered to be justified because the fieldworker is allegedly intellectually inferior and does not know how to interpret his own work correctly.

6. Open Questions

Unfortunately, Legate et al. (2013) are guilty of the shortcomings they accuse Levinson of. Due to space considerations I discuss only one of several examples in detail. Levinson proposed (P4) “it remains an interesting question whether treating, say, English as regular (with large numbers of simple rules) is more complex than treating it as context-free (with fewer, more complex rules; see Perfors et al. 2010)” (Levinson, 2013, 154).

Legate et al. attack P4 for two reasons. First they claim, “even if a more principled application of statistics were to show that multiple center-embedding is unexpectedly rare in some corpus, such a finding would not ... support [P4]” (Legate et al., 2013, 8). Given that P4 merely states that a certain question is interesting, Legate et al. must feel entitled to determine which questions are interesting for everyone. They consider this imposition justified because “there is *now* broad consensus that a variety of syntactic models (including Tree Adjoining Grammar, Combinatorial Categorical [sic] Grammar, Minimalist Grammar and others) converge onto the “mildly context sensitive” class, which appears to have the appropriate descriptive power for natural language syntax (Joshi 1985)” (Legate et al., 2013, 8, emphasis added).

It is remarkable that, in the face of obvious disagreement, they base their claim about *current* consensus on a single source published before the term “minimalist grammar” had been coined. Even a very superficial survey of more recent literature reveals that

Levinson is not the only researcher challenging the alleged consensus. For example, it has been proposed that it is possible to “sketch a model to account for human language behavior without relying on hierarchical structure” (Frank et al., 2012, 4⁹).

But there is a more serious problem with the presentation by Legate et al. They refer to a broad consensus about a restricted technical claim about string sets. From this consensus they draw the conclusion that Levinson’s proposal would be rejected by everyone (sensible) in the field. However, not everyone in the field accepts that natural languages are string sets generated by a Universal Grammar and/or that generative grammars are the best model for human languages. So the consensus about where on the Chomsky-hierarchy a grammar that could generate a language like English is located is not relevant to the issue Levinson explores: whether a generative grammar is the best model for human language. There is no broad consensus on this issue. Some researchers reject the Chomskyan Universal Grammar model (e.g. Sampson, 2002; MacWhinney, 2004; Tomasello, 2008; Everett, 2012). Others have challenged the legitimacy of the current minimalist model (e.g., Seuren, 2004; Johnson & Lappin, 1997), or the internal coherence of bio-linguistics (Behme, 2011; Postal, 2009, 2012, Neef, 2013). Legate et al. may disagree with any of these (and other) researchers, and promote their own biolinguistic proposals. But, given the widely diverging views on the nature of natural language, it is misleading to speak of a “broad consensus”.

⁹ It cannot be assumed that Legate et al. were unaware of this work because it has been discussed by one of the authors (Pesetsky, 2013a, slide 82). Given that this work partly undermines the charge against Levinson it is remarkable that Legate et al. fail to mention it.

The next claim is equally problematic: “Furthermore, L13 seems to suggest that regular grammars may be in effect sufficient despite being less powerful than context free grammars, since center-embedding structures are very rare. But the paper (Perfors et al. 2010) that L13 cites in support of this claim shows no such result. ... it is puzzling how L13 could interpret Perfors et al. (2010) as in favor of regular languages” (Legate et al., 2013, 8).

Perfors et al. have indeed not reported that regular grammars “are sufficient because center-embeddings are very rare”. But, Levinson has nowhere suggested that these researchers reported such findings. He has cited Perfors et al. only once in a slightly ambiguous sentence. He could mean either (i) that Perfors et al. treat language as context free, with fewer, more complex rules (than regular grammars) or (ii) that Perfors et al. have conducted research on the different types of grammars¹⁰. It *is* truly puzzling that Legate et al. attempt to impose a claim on Levinson that is not supported by anything he wrote.

7. Conclusions

In spite of numerous attempts to clarify what is at issue in the recursion debates misunderstandings continue to be the rule, not rare exceptions. Given that the issue is not

¹⁰ I am indebted to Paul Postal for confirming that these are the two most natural readings of Levinson’s sentence. Both readings would be consistent with what has been reported by Perfors et al. (2010). It seems unlikely that Levinson had the self-incriminating interpretation in mind that Legate et al. attribute to him.

incomprehensibly complicated, and that over a decade of debate has not resulted in measurable progress towards mutual understanding (or in some cases even respect for an opposing position), one has to suspect that not all researchers are genuinely interested in finding a mutually acceptable solution. Legate et al. claim that they have written their article to “express our concern at the pervasive misrepresentations of fact and faulty reasoning presented” (Legate, et al. 2013, 1). However, their own article raises even greater concerns. Legate et al. never *justify* why the biolinguistic position is the only legitimate view in the recursion debate. Instead, the article documents unscholarly dogmatism and an unwillingness to interact reasonably with those who defend a different position in the recursion debates. Given that Pesetsky discussed in detail a passage from Hornstein (2013) but did not object to the evaluation that Legate et al. (2013) “is devastating. There’s nothing left of the Levinson (2013) article” (Hornstein, 2013), one has to assume that “evisceration of an opponent” was the true goal of this paper. One can hardly expect any progress in the recursion debate before such disrespectful attitude is eliminated from bio-linguistics.

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