

Comment on Michael Devitt, *Ignorance of Language*
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I am a native speaker of the English language. As such, I am in touch somehow with a number of abstract objects, including types of sounds, words, phrases, and sentences, and with their properties, including conditions on their interpretation. Like other native speakers, I can make some reflective judgements about these objects. The objects themselves enter into a system, or a family of systems, constituting a grammar, with at least the levels of phonology, syntax, and semantics. The grammar, however expounded, will sum up very general phenomena, sometimes directly, sometimes in consequence of the interaction of a variety of elements. For instance, consider the pair (1)-(2):

- (1) We couldn't find books with any missing pages.
- (2) ??We couldn't find the book with any missing pages.

My judgement, and yours to the extent you are a native speaker, is that (1) is routine, but (2) is strange. The proper account of the status of (2) is, I think, the following: First, Negative Polarity *any*, seen in both (1) and (2), must be within the immediate scope of negation, and therefore must have wide scope over the Noun Phrase within which it occurs. So (1) is effectively as in (3):

- (3) \neg [Any x : x a missing page] (We could find books with x)

But, second, the definite description *the book* is an island for scope (as illustrated for instance by the difference in meaning between *I read papers by everybody* versus *I read the paper by everybody*), so that existential *any* cannot escape the Noun Phrase. By the first proposition, *any missing pages* must get wide scope in (2); by the second, it cannot. So (2) violates the syntactic conditions on Logical Form (LF). Similar examples, at all levels of description, abound. They illustrate the properties of my grammar.

I take it that in what I have just said there is nothing that Michael disputes in his book, or would dispute now. He does, however, dispute the thesis that my relation to my grammar is that of *knowing* it. Early on (p. 5), Michael suggests that we replace what he calls the "loose talk" of knowledge with talk of *competence*, a notion notoriously introduced in Chomsky's *Aspects* in 1965. Throughout *Ignorance of Language*, Michael writes, naturally enough from the etymological point of view, of "linguistic competence" as a property had by the linguistically competent. A mild correction, however, is appropriate here. In Chomsky's sense a person's competence is simply that person's grammar: the difference between competence and performance is the difference between what a person knows (the grammar) and what that person does. So a person might have normal competence, but not be competent at all, or might, like a non-native speaker, be competent enough in English without having my competence; that is, my native speaker's grammar. So much the worse, perhaps, for Chomsky's terminology; anyway, it's clear that Michael, in writing for instance (p. 66) that competence is "a competence to use language," thinks of it as an ability or capacity distinct from the grammar itself.

I turn away, then, from Michael's use of "competence," and back to the notion of knowledge of language. We are allowing, I assume, that I, or any other normal human, *has* a grammar (perhaps several); that with maturation there were several stages in its development; that human children rapidly reach a "steady state" with respect to grammatical properties of all sorts; and that whatever is responsible for this is a faculty or congeries of faculties of the mind. Why, then, advert to the notion of knowledge? There are a number of reasons.

First of all, it's proposed that the relation between one's linguistic and perceptual experience and one's grammar is *evidential*; that is, that the grammar takes shape through the application of general principles to what is heard, and to what is not heard. The evidential relation may be very direct. A child learning English voices the final *s* in the plural of *taco*, whereas a child exposed to Spanish does not. Perhaps this result is merely a matter of statistical sampling. In other cases, however, the relation is indirect. Thus in French a Question word such as *qui*, when extracted from the subject position of a complement clause, induces a change in the complementizer from *que* to *qui*; in Irish there is complementizer alternation across all intermediate clauses, and from any extraction position. Similarly: in my English the doubled or so-called "parasitic" gap is available in Cleft sentences such as (4):

(4) It was the article about global warming that they filed without reading.

(meaning: they filed the article without reading it), but not in the passive (5):

(5) *The article about global warming was filed without reading.

(to repair (5), just add a final *it*). The learner, in order to generalize to a grammar that has these linguistic properties, obviously must be sensitive to the abstract grammatical distinctions that make it go.

Second, language change (which is always going on) involves "imperfect" learning, where what is picked up is not what the learner is exposed to. The driving forces for change are generally abstract, and induce, as a deductive consequence of general properties of human language, the changes in question. For example, there is considerable interest in the question why old French, which like other Romance languages allowed the dropping of subject pronouns in tensed clauses, came to require subjects, as in English; likewise in the question why English lost the Verb-second rule that applies to German. The abstract accounts on offer may be right or wrong; the point, however, is that they are constructed on the basis of the assumption that learners adopt general grammars, with manifold consequences.

Further, language difference, as Michael appreciates, is supposed to be explained in part by appeal to divergences in the variety of systems that can in principle satisfy the general conditions on human language. As a special case, it is of interest to ask why some languages abound in, and others lack, certain constructions. To take an example from my

own work, why do we find in Romance an absence of Verb-Particle constructions (e.g., *come in, give up, take over*) and the absence of a word corresponding to English *to* as in *I walked to the store*? We have plenty of Romance words taken up in English (*enter, resign, commandeer*) corresponding to Verb-Particle constructions, but it's a one-way street: Italian isn't about to adopt *dare sopra* meaning *give up*. The matter is not to be decided on the basis of geography or history: Chinese is like English, Korean like Romance. The answer I suggested (following in part work by Leonard Talmy, and subsequently improved upon by Raffaella Folli, Gillian Ramchand, and others) was that the semantic computation involved in *give up* or *walk to* required the syntactic heads (*give, walk*) to get together with non-heads (*up, to*) in a particular way (as shown by the logical implications of the corresponding sentences), one that was not available in grammars of another design. The conclusion would be that the grammar of, say, Italian, could not be extended so as to allow counterparts of *walk to the store* and the like. The system of the native speaker of Romance closes off that possibility (though there is nothing a priori wrong with it).

Finally, with respect to the grammar of a mature normal speaker, it is supposed that the system demarcates conditions on form and meaning, of which the status of individual examples is a more or less remote deductive consequence; and furthermore that their status is not a matter of what anyone is likely to say, or what's reasonable and so forth. Chomsky (1965) gave a nice example of the latter phenomenon, (6):

(6) I almost had my wallet stolen.

This sentence is three ways ambiguous. It takes awhile to see the full ambiguity, but once it is seen it is obvious. The linguistic system is to that extent autonomous.

In the case of (6) and many other examples, we rely upon native speaker judgements, intuitions as they are called, about what can and cannot be said, and what meanings or range of meanings may be allowed. Michael devotes considerable space to arguing that linguistic intuitions should not be seen as "the voice of competence." In fact, despite the occasional quotation that he takes from Chomsky's writings, I am not aware that anyone, including Chomsky, holds that they are. We ask someone (maybe ourselves), "Can you say XYZ?" and the response is "OK," or a frown; virtually all the rest relies on theory. Certainly, anyone who was able to use language appropriately but couldn't answer hypothetical questions about it would suffer from a strange and horrid pathology; but that's not to say that judgements are infallible, or come neatly sorted into types. (Indeed, the examples (1)-(2) and (4)-(6) above are rather delicate, and may require some reflection; part of the reason I chose them.)

Michael spends some time arguing that thought is in a way prior to language, both metaphysically and in order of explanation. In fact, this position is proposed, or anyway conjectured, by a number of researchers---to put it crudely, the view would be that the difference between us and chimpanzees (or bonobos, the current favorite) is that we but not they have fully recursive syntax. Michael also devotes space to the question whether the hypothesis of a language of thought in the sense of Jerry Fodor affects matters.

Perhaps it affects what he, Michael, calls competence; but I doubt that it affects the notion of knowledge of language at all. The reason is that, assuming a language of thought---that is, assuming that attitudes and epistemic states are realized through mental representations whose content is the content of those attitudes and states, and whose realizations involve appropriate connections to other states of the organism, as well as to the externalities that are responsible for the content---all knowledge, whether conscious or not, turns up in the same syntactic way; and there is plenty of room in Fodor's view for the notion of unconscious knowledge. My knowledge that my mother came from Missouri results from my holding somewhere in the appropriate storehouse a representation X whose content is that my mother came from Missouri, retrievable consciously as it happens, and available for recall. My knowledge that *any* is a negative polarity item that must appear within the immediate scope of negation results from my holding somewhere in the appropriate storehouse a representation Y whose content is that *any* must appear within the immediate scope of negation. This knowledge is not consciously retrievable (I can't even "hear myself" following the rule, so to speak), but it is available for a variety of tasks and perceptual protocols, even if, in Fodor's terms, "informationally encapsulated." True, Fodor has taken the view that semantics should concern itself first of all with semantics for the language of thought, the semantics of English arising by translation into it. But there is no reason I am aware of to accept this; no reason why there should not be, in my language of thought, not just some translation of, say, *I didn't see anybody*, but also the statement: *any* is a negative polarity item within the immediate scope of negation. Even if perceivers do interpret via translation, how was the translation arrived at? I know of no way of framing the hypotheses here that doesn't involve the learner making conjectures about the semantics of the ambient language.

To reinforce the remarks above concerning the involvement of the notion of knowledge in generative linguistic investigation, one might compare the discussion in that domain with the basis for something that at least seems a bit closer to the surface, namely contemporary pragmatics. All pragmatics (whether Relevance-Theoretic, or fundamentally Gricean, or whatnot) is concerned, among other things, with accounting for speaker implicature under various assumptions, and all of it assumes the correctness, in the relevant respects, of the linguistic structures that enter the explanatory picture. The explanations that are offered in pragmatics are *rationalizing* explanations: they show, or aim to show, that our grasp of implicature, conventional or conversational, is a rational activity, under hypotheses about our common knowledge of our common rationality and intentions. As Sylvain Bromberger remarked years ago, no pragmatic theory explains or aims to explain how we are able to arrive at its consequences "in real time," as the computer scientist might say. In giving the background against which it is rational, for example, to assume that when Michael says to me, "Most of my students passed," he believes, and intends for me to come to believe, that not all passed (because he assumes that I know that he is in a position to know who passed and who didn't---it's his class after all; and he's being cooperative and relevant, and assumes that I take him to be so), nothing is said about the processing that may lead me to this conclusion. Whether, in view of this fact, contemporary pragmatics is "psychology" or not does not seem to me an interesting question. I would say the same about the question whether contemporary generative linguistic theory is or is not psychology.

Like many before him, Michael raises questions about the "psychological reality" of abstract grammars such as I have described. I don't expect these questions to go away, even if the question, "Is It Psychology?" is put aside. He also proposes that the thesis that accounts of performance must respect the findings of grammatical theory doesn't amount to much. I think it amounts to a rather a lot, as indicated by the sensitivity of performance to abstract categories and principles, the intentional categories of pragmatic explanation, and so on.

Could it turn out in the end that current research programs, running from phonology through syntax and semantics to pragmatics, succeed only to the extent that they depict language acquisition and mastery as what Crispin Wright once called a "rational achievement," leaving the procedures for the causal maintenance and implementation of such mastery to distantly related systems, or perhaps (as has been suggested for capacities as varied as human vision on the one hand, and decision-making on the other) to a jumble of tricks and heuristics? Even if things might turn out that way, knowledge of language is not undermined---and the same, I think, may be said of knowledge of principles of decision, or our knowledge of the relations of our perceptual cues to the physical world.

There are some important points where I agree with Michael, and where (as I have myself written variously over the years) it seems to me that a better response than I have seen from those who think otherwise should be forthcoming. One point is Internalism, a thesis that often passes in Linguistics without argument, and about which Michael is, I think, appropriately skeptical. Another that I would add is Individualism in the sense of Tyler Burge, the view that crucial properties of the perceptual and other systems supporting the understanding of language are to be individuated without reference to the external environment that they represent. That thesis seems to me false with respect to all aspects of language, as suggested above in my remarks about the speaker-hearer's sensitivity to abstract linguistic features. I agree also with Michael that it is most unfortunate to be running together talk of mental representations (whatever they turn out to be) with talk of the things---vowels, nouns, syntactic structures, conditions on interpretation---that they are supposed to be mental representations *of*. In practice, however, I think that these various pieces of ideology---Internalism, Individualism, talk of mental representations in the linguist's preface (but of abstract syntactic structures in the body of the work)---do not play a significant role in the exposition of linguistic theory, or in generative linguistic investigations generally. In contrast, I believe that the notion of knowledge of language cannot be excised from the research program; that is, it is not as if the inquiry and its results, or apparent results, could be accepted whilst withdrawing the interpretation usually given to it. Rather, the conception of grammatical organization as a system of knowledge available to the individual (though generally not consciously) is what drives questions, answers, explanations, criticism. It's not just the truism that to the extent that some theory of a person's grammar is correct, something in that person must make it correct; rather, the question what's in the person is what drives the grammatical inquiry in the first place.

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