ENG423A:
Current Issues in Linguistics

GOALS OF LINGUISTIC THEORY I

Goals of Generative Linguistic Theory

1. What is knowledge of language?

2. How does knowledge of language arise in the mind?

3. How is knowledge of language put to use?

4. What are the neurobiological correlates of the knowledge of language?

5. How did knowledge of language evolve in the species?

Tasks for the linguist

1. Specify the **steady state** of the knowledge of language.

2. Construct a theory of acquisition which is compatible with the known facts about language acquisition in the species with a theory the **initial state** of linguistic knowledge.

3. Construct a theory of **language use** – the weakest part of the theory, and with good reasons.

4. Discover the neurobiological correlates of the various aspects of the knowledge of language

5. Construct a theory of the evolution of linguistic knowledge in the species which is compatible with what is known about human evolution in general.

Answers to Questions 1-5

1. A theory of how language specific grammars work encompassing the rich diversity of the known languages – **the Grammar of the Steady State or the language-specific grammar**

2. A theory of how the initial state of knowledge of language is to be made explicit capturing the invariant core of underlying human languages – **the Grammar of the Initial State or the Universal Grammar**

    Universalism as a fall out of innatism

Answers to Questions 1-5

3. A distinction between Competence and Performance – the latter never measures up to the former – **the design for use argument**

Chomsky - this question calls for a theory of performance, theories of production and interpretation.

The problem is beyond understanding : ". . . it would be unreasonable to pose the problem of how Jones decides to say what he does, or how he interprets what he hears in a particular circumstance." (Chomsky and Lasnik, 1993)

In general, it is not the case that language is readily usable or "designed for use".

Is language designed for use?

Ambiguities

1. Flying planes can be dangerous.

2. The psychiatrist helped torture victims.

Redundancies

1. All the men and women in this class are drowsy.

Multiple embeddings

1. Quite a few of the students who you met who come from New York are my friends.

2.The man who the boy who the students recognized pointed out is my friend.

Is language designed for use?

Linguistic Underspecification - ellipsis

Ram loves to help his wife in the kitchen and so does his neighbour.

Garden Path sentence

1. The complex houses married and single students and their families.

2. The horse raced past the barn fell.

3. The old man the boat.

4. The soldiers marched across the playground are a disgrace.

What is a Garden Path sentence?

A sentence that creates a momentarily ambiguous interpretation because it contains a word or phrase that can be interpreted in multiple ways, causing the hearer to begin to believe that a phrase will mean one thing when in reality it means something else.

When heard, the sentence seems ungrammatical, makes no sense, and requires backtracking for an alternative parsing.

Design for use?

An argument which should recall to our mind a discussion we had during our historiography lectures

The separation of linguistic knowledge and world knowledge.

A separation that Panini professes but does not quite achieve.

Design for use

A flawed argument

The argument rests on the assumption that language is decontextualized.

All the instances of 'imperfections' cited in the argument cease to be imperfections if language is contextualized.

To Chomsky's credit, when he spoke of linguistic creativity, he also spoke of another feature of language – Structure Dependency

Structure Dependency

1. The baby seems to be asleep.

2. The baby seems asleep.

3. The baby seems to be sleeping./*The baby seems sleeping.

1. Ram saw Sita with her best friend's husband.

2. R saw S and her best friend's husband.

3. Who did R see S with?/ * Who did R see S and?

1. I believe that R would marry S.

2. I believe the claim that R would marry S.

3. Who do you believe that R would marry?/ *Who do you believe the claim that R would marry?

Structure Dependency

Operations in language are sensitive to certain structural constraints.

These constraints can be stated only in structural terms.

Context of use is irrelevant to this notion of structure dependency

The structural constraints are also invariant across languages – the foundation of a Universal Grammar as a structural notion.