

Ignorance of Linguistics: A note on Michael Devitt's *Ignorance of Language*

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Abstract:

Michael Devitt has argued that Chomsky, along with many other Linguists and philosophers, is ignorant of the true nature of Generative Linguistics. In particular, Devitt argues that Chomsky and others wrongly believe the proper object of linguistic inquiry to be speakers' competences, rather than the languages that speakers are competent with. In return, some commentators on Devitt's work have returned the accusation, arguing that it is Devitt who is ignorant about Linguistics. In this note, I consider whether there might be less to this apparent dispute than meets the eye.

Key words: Linguistics, Language, Knowledge, Competence, Chomsky

1. Accusations of Ignorance.

Michael Devitt's recent book *Ignorance of Language* (Devitt, 2006) has sparked a great deal of critical discussion. One might say that it's hit a nerve. But it's not clear to me exactly what the locus of dispute amounts to. In this note I want to step back a bit and ask whether, once some of the dust has settled, we might find rather a lot of agreement between Devitt and his seeming opponents, and not a lot of disagreement. My minimal aim is to invite Devitt to say a bit more about his position in the hope that that might help to focus subsequent discussion.

Devitt argues that even its most prominent practitioners are mistaken as to the nature of Linguistics.² Noam Chomsky has claimed that the topic of Linguistics as studied within the generative tradition is not—or, not primarily—*language* (at least as

¹ Earlier versions were presented at a workshop on Devitt's work at the University of Nottingham and at a conference on the Philosophy of Linguistics at the ICU in Dubrovnik. Thanks to the audiences on both occasions and also to Robert Black, John Collins, Greg Currie, Michael Devitt, Gareth Fitzgerald, Jennifer Hornsby, Peter Ludlow, Robert Matthews, Georges Rey, Gabriel Segal, Barry C. Smith, Mark Textor, Charles Travis. In what follows, I draw on unpublished work by Devitt that may not represent his official position. The purpose is to pursue some of the issues raised in that work, regardless of their status in Devitt's own account, itself a matter of limited interest in the context of naturalistic inquiry.

² My focus throughout is, like Devitt's, core Generative Linguistics. Prima facie, at least, it is irrelevant how the issues to be discussed play out with respect to e.g. Sociolinguistics.

language typically has been viewed by philosophers³). So, the primary object of inquiry is not the various systems of expressions together with their phonetic, grammatical and semantical properties. Rather, the primary object of inquiry is the properties of humans through which they have a range of psychological capacities associated, more or less, with commonsense cases of linguistic competence. In this, Chomsky has been followed by the vast preponderance of Generative Linguists and Philosophers of Linguistics. In the face of this consensus, Devitt argues that, once one attends to some elementary distinctions, it can be seen that Chomsky has (and others have) got this wrong. Linguistics is—as etymology predicts—about *languages* and their properties, rather than about *language users* and their properties. And Devitt proposes this as an account of what Linguistics *is* about, rather than what it *should* be about. This is because he wants to leave standing what he sees as the great fruits of Linguistics thus far. In a recent attempt to clarify his position, Devitt puts the last point as follows:

...I am not against the research strategy of producing generative grammars in pretty much the way they are being produced. (2007, p.2.)

Devitt continues in a footnote:

...What linguists *do* does indeed determine the domain of linguistics... That's one thing. *Opinions about* what domain has been so determined is another. (2007, p.2, fn4.)

Hence, Devitt is committed to viewing Chomsky, and others, as mistaken—ignorant—about the true subject matter of Generative Linguistics *as they pursue it*.

Predictably enough, those who seek to sustain Chomsky's view of the subject matter of Linguistics have returned the accusation. They have accused Devitt of ignorance of Linguistics. They have alleged that, since it is obvious to those who know about Generative Linguistics that its subject matter is properties of speakers, not products of

³ For purposes of this note, I remain neutral as to the metaphysical status of language or languages. It may be that there are genuine dispute between Devitt and Chomsky regarding that status, but in the first instance the issues discussed here can (and, I believe, should) be pursued independently of any such dispute.

exercises of capacities of speakers, Devitt would only make the claims that he does if he failed to know obvious facts about Linguistics.

So, we are presented with two accusations of ignorance. A first question that needs to be addressed is: Which, if any, is right? Notice that, at least in the first instance, these accusations of ignorance do not concern this or that particular finding in Linguistics. They concern the large-scale architecture of the discipline as a whole. What sort of claims does the Linguist aim to make? What sorts of method are appropriate for assessing those claims? So, we should not expect the issue to be resolved by appeal to a single critical piece of evidence that one or another party has simply missed.

Given a preliminary answer to the first question, we should consider a second. How is the proposed distribution of ignorance (and, perhaps, knowledge) to be explained? For instance, suppose Chomsky is ignorant of Linguistics. How is his ignorance to be explained? Crucially, any such explanation must not undermine the following Moorean fact: Chomsky has instigated, and sustained, the most successful research program in the history of Linguistics. If no suitable explanation is forthcoming, its absence will surely place pressure on the preliminary finding that it is Chomsky who is ignorant.

So, we need answers to two questions:

(Question 1) Who, in this dispute, is ignorant of the nature of Linguistics?

(Question 2) How is their ignorance to be explained?

I shall focus here on the first question. But it is important, in considering that question, to keep the second question firmly in mind.

2. Options.

We should begin by distinguishing what I'll call a *view* of the target of a science from an *approach* to pursuing work within the science. Crudely, a *view* is a large-scale take on what the science is about, its primary object of inquiry, the nature of its proper

objects, and so forth. An *approach* consists of the actual methods, sources of evidence, etc. employed within the science. Then the putative dispute between Devitt and Chomsky is supposed primarily to concern the correct *view* of the discipline of Linguistics. In effect, the initial accusation of ignorance from Devitt is that Chomsky's view is based on ignorance; and the counter-accusation is that Devitt's view is so based.

At the most general level, there are four potential outcomes to this dispute:

(A) Chomsky is ignorant; Devitt is also ignorant.

(B) Chomsky is not ignorant; Devitt is.

(C) Chomsky is ignorant; Devitt is not.

(D) Neither Chomsky nor Devitt is ignorant.

I have ranked the options by first blush plausibility. Since Linguistics is an empirical science, and since we are rightly modest about our epistemic powers with respect to the nature of empirical science, (A) has the most initial plausibility. However, the present question concerns how things stand to the best of our present knowledge. So, we can safely set (A) aside.⁴

(B) has the next greatest initial plausibility. Unless the development of Chomsky's *approach* to Linguistics has been cognitively insulated from his large-scale *view* about the object of inquiry, we should expect epistemic support for his view to flow from epistemic support for the approach, hence theories, developed on its basis. Hence, on the assumption that Chomsky's view has shaped his approach, the epistemic success of Linguistics provides some support for his view. But it seems that

⁴ It might be suggested that, since Chomsky is a linguist, it is not initially plausible that he would have the wrong view of linguistics. However, there are two reasons for thinking that such a suggestion would be mistaken. First, the fact that even the very best practitioners of particular empirical sciences often disagree about foundational matters indicates that their views on such matters can be mistaken. Second, the usual pessimistic induction from the fates of past views of leading practitioners of empirical sciences make it somewhat plausible that current views are at least partly, and perhaps largely, mistaken.

the success of Linguistics can supply no such support for Devitt's view, since—on the assumption that it differs from Chomsky's view—it has played no such role in guiding the approaches of practicing Linguists.

Next we have (C). It's not out of the question that a Philosopher could correct the large-scale views of prominent practitioners of a science. It can be claimed, with some plausibility, that this has in fact happened in the history of Philosophy. For instance, there is some plausibility to the claim that, when Operationalism fell out of favour around the middle of the twentieth century, this was due in part to Philosophical considerations. That said, the stagnation induced by Operationalism in the fields it governed—the fields in which it shaped *approaches*—played a more prominent role in its end. But that is consistent with Philosophy having hastened its end. So, it's not out of the question that a Philosopher might correct a scientist in this way. But claims to that effect should be viewed with some suspicion, I think. And suspicion is apt especially when the Philosophical claim is that the view in question *could* reasonably govern approaches to a science, but in fact fails to. For, unlike the claim that Operationalism is bankrupt quite generally, the latter sort of claim does not appear to be the sort of claim that could be assessed from the armchair. Since Devitt's claim is that a view like Chomsky's could guide approaches within sciences other than Linguistics—for instance, that it could guide psycholinguistics—it would appear to require detailed empirical study of the practice of Linguistics in order to establish whether or not the view is operative there. For if we agree that there could be a science called 'Linguistics' that was guided by a view like Chomsky's, then it is hard to see how arguments not based on consideration of the practice actually called 'Linguistics' could bear on the question whether that practice is actually guided by such a view.

Finally, (D). Again, I don't think that it's out of the question that both parties to such a dispute could be right, so *not* ignorant, although in typical cases it would be the most surprising of the four outcomes.

Let's label an approach to inquiry in some broad domain that is supported, as it turns out by empirical success, APPROACH. And let's label one large-scale view, able to support or guide APPROACH, VIEW₁. Finally, let's use VIEW₂ as a label for

a putatively alternative view, also able to guide APPROACH. As far as I can tell, we would have outcome (D) if at least one of the following held:

- (1) VIEW₁ and VIEW₂ are distinct, are both genuinely able to guide APPROACH, could both guide APPROACH in the same way and to the same extent, and there is nothing other than guidance of APPROACH that allows us to choose between those views.
- (2) VIEW₁ and VIEW₂ are the same view, notational variants of one another, etc.
- (3) VIEW₁ and VIEW₂ are distinct, but they are both instances of a more general view, SUPER-VIEW, that is able to guide APPROACH, etc.

In the present case, we would have something like the following:

(1') VIEW₁ is the view that the primary object of linguistic inquiry is language, and its properties. VIEW₂ is the view that the object of inquiry is speakers, and their properties. Both views could guide the actual APPROACH to Linguistics in the same way and to the same extent, and there is nothing other than their guidance of that APPROACH that allows us to choose between the views.

(2') The two views as to the object of Linguistic inquiry are notational variants of one another (since, e.g., linguistic properties just are properties of speakers or the relevant properties of speakers just are linguistic properties).

(3') The two views are instances of the more general view, SUPERVIEW, according to which, since relevant properties of speakers and relevant properties of language mutually determine one another, one can approach Linguistics from either end of the telescope.

Although I think that, at first blush, (D) can seem to be the least likely outcome of such a dispute, I also think that testing for (D) has epistemic priority. In order to engage with confidence in such a dispute, we need to have assured ourselves that we are involved in a genuine dispute, so that at most one party can be victorious. And in

order to engage productively, we need to have a clear view of what, if anything, is at issue and so what sorts of considerations would count for or against one or another party to the dispute.

I want to suggest that, implausible as it may seem on initial inspection, the apparent dispute between Devitt and Chomsky may very well be *only* apparent. If I'm wrong, it would be helpful, at least to me, if Devitt were able to help me to see more clearly wherein exactly the real disagreement resides.

3. Mutual determination.

As earlier quotes make plain, Devitt seeks an account of the subject matter of Linguistics as it is practiced, perhaps allowing for some self-conception driven errors at the periphery. Pursuit of such an account is therefore at least partly an empirical pursuit, a matter of fitting theory of subject matter to observation of Linguistic practice, including theory construction and output theories. Devitt is therefore committed to holding that widespread adoption of his view would have (little or) no impact upon the practice of practicing Linguists. In fact, I think that Devitt thinks that widespread adoption of his view would have (little or) no impact on practice because he thinks that Linguists are already guided by it, at least to a significant extent. What would make a difference, on Devitt's view, would be if Linguists were to start guiding their research according to Chomsky's view. Now this claim requires careful handling. I take it that many Linguists, including Chomsky himself, think that they are guided by Chomsky's view, or something like it. Otherwise they would make more explicit their opposition to the view that Chomsky presents, and Devitt would have an easier time summoning support for his position. So, an explanation would be wanted for Linguists' ignorance—or at least reticence—concerning the grounds of their own practice. And as far as I can see, Devitt does not seek to provide such an explanation. But let's leave that issue to one side. The question remains whether it would really make any difference if Linguists were to guide their practice according to the views of Chomsky rather than Devitt, and if so, what difference it would make.

Now consider Devitt's response to the complaint that his view would render mysterious Linguists' commonplace appeals to psychological evidence, e.g. those arising from acquisition studies:

It is one thing for a theory to have psychological evidence, it is another for it to be psychological. Any theory can be supported by all sorts of evidence [Duhem-Quine]... (Devitt, 2008, p.678)

Well, in the abstract what Devitt says is, of course, true. But the central point of the Duhem-Quine thesis is that the connection between a theory and its evidence is itself mediated by theory. So in order for psychological evidence to bear on a theory of linguistic properties, a theory mediating the connection between psychology and language is required. Of course, the theory that linguistic properties are, or are determined directly by, psychological properties is only one such theory, though perhaps it's the most obvious. What, then, is Devitt's alternative theory?

He writes:

psychological facts together with social and environmental facts determine linguistic facts. (2006, p.39)

So, to that extent, his mediating theory seems to agree with the Linguist's. However, Devitt continues:

But this determination does not make linguistic facts psychological... (2008, p.679)

Even if symbols have their properties in virtue of certain mental facts that would not make the theory of those symbols about those facts and so would not make the theory part of psychology. Indeed, consider the consequences of supposing it would, and then generalizing: every theory—economic, psychological, biological, etc.—would be about physical facts and part of physics because physical facts ultimately determine everything. A special science does not lose its own domain because that domain supervenes on another. (2006, p.40)

Again, what Devitt says is, in the abstract, quite correct. But the question whether a special science has a proprietary domain, rather than being absorbed by a subvening domain, is not trivial to answer. In particular, the answer to such a question depends on whether the special science has its own proprietary generalizations and explanations, and does not simply restate the generalizations and explanations already contained in the subvening domain. For instance, it is only because (or insofar as) psychology is able to capture generalisations, and to offer explanations, that differ from the generalizations and explanations offered in physics (and biology, etc.), that psychology is taken to have its own domain. And that would seem to depend upon failure of mutual determination by the facts and explanations in the two domains, so that the generalisations and explanations available therein do not fix one another. Or, more minimally, and assuming mutual determination of the facts in the two domains, it would seem to depend upon there being some special explanatory priority attending one or another determinant.

4. “Respect”

As far as I can tell, Devitt offers no reason to think that there is a failure of mutual dependence between relevant psychological facts and relevant linguistic facts. That is, he provides no reason for expecting linguistic properties not to supervene on competence properties, or expecting competence properties not to supervene on linguistic properties. Indeed, his adherence to what he calls the “respect” constraint appears to foreclose on his allowing for such failure. Let me explain.

Devitt uses a variety of analogies, including inquiry into the properties of the waggle dance of the bee, in order to draw an important distinction. The distinction is between a competence—and e.g. explanations for features of a competence—and the products of that competence—and e.g. explanations for features of those products. Thus, Devitt suggests, it is one thing to study the dance of the bee—a product—and another thing to study the bee competence responsible for sustaining dances with those properties. This is so, we might think—and echoing Devitt’s earlier warning—even if it should turn out that the relevant properties of the bee-dance are determined by relevant properties of bees’ competences. But Devitt does not think that the studies

are independent. For he thinks that study of the products of a competence—e.g., the bees' dance—can be revealing about the nature of the competence itself. This is so because

...the state of competence, and the embodied processing rules that constitute it, must “respect” the structure rules of the dance in that they are apt to produce dances that are governed by those rules. (2007, p.4.)

Thus, Devitt's “respect” constraint. Devitt continues:

So, on the strength of von Frisch's theory we know this minimal proposition about any competent bee: that there is something-we-know-not-what within the bee that respects the structure rules that von Frisch discovered. (2007, p.4.)

It follows that—with respect to the bee at least, and insofar as our claims about competence do not outstrip those determined by the respect constraint—relevant properties of the product determine relevant properties of the source competence. Hence, in this case, it is plausible that relevant properties of the bees' dance are determined by relevant properties of their competence—again, at least insofar as those properties do not outstrip those determined by the respect constraint. And it is plausible, given the “respect” constraint, that relevant properties of the competence are determined by relevant properties of the bee dance. I'll return to the bees in a moment. First, let me spell out the analogous view of language and linguistic competence.

The analogous view of language and linguistic competence would be the following. We begin by distinguishing two sorts of fact: first, facts about linguistic competence and its properties and, second, facts about language and its properties. If we like, we can also distinguish between the project of studying one and the project of studying the other. But it's not yet clear why we should want to. For the relevant properties of language (e.g., its grammatical rules) are determined by relevant properties of the competence. And moreover, relevant properties of the competence are determined, via the “respect” constraint by properties of the language.

Unless one of the following conditions is met, then, it is apt to seem that there is only a pedantic distinction to be drawn between the two projects.⁵ First, we could reinstate a difference if it could be shown that a theory of the competence should go beyond properties determined by the properties of language together with the “respect” constraint. Second, we could reinstate a difference if it could be shown, for some reason other than a demanding view of competence, that mutual determination failed. (Perhaps, for instance, it fails because the relevant properties of language are not determined solely by properties of the competence). Third, we could reinstate a difference if it could be shown that, despite the mutual determination of language and linguistic competence, one or another determinant enjoys explanatory (or some other form of) priority. For instance, we could reinstate a difference if it could be shown that, although language and competence are guaranteed to run in step, the properties of the language are to be explained by properties of the competence (together with the fact that linguistic properties are fixed by competence) rather than *vice versa*.

Devitt responded to an earlier version of this suggestion by pointing out that he doesn't think that linguistic properties supervene on competence properties; rather he thinks that they supervene on facts about thoughts. I have three things to say about Devitt's response. First, it's not clear that it's true, even on Devitt's own account. For even if the view were defensible that linguistic facts supervene on facts about thought, it wouldn't follow that the linguistic facts don't also supervene on facts about competence. They might do so, for instance, if competence facts also supervene on facts about thought. And if competence facts and linguistic facts were to come apart, then we would face two serious difficulties: first, we would lose the ability to explain how linguistic practice, focussed as it is upon competence, might reveal anything about the linguistic facts; second, we would need an account of how Linguists might go about studying those amongst the linguistic facts that fail to supervene on competence. Is there another way of getting at those facts, other than by relying on the operations of competent subjects?⁶ Second, even if it were true, it's not clear how it

⁵ For pursuit of one view according to which the distinction is somewhat pedantic, see Longworth (2007).

⁶ It might be suggested—and was suggested to me by Devitt—that, since mutual determination holds at most for those elements of the two domains that are controlled by the respect constraint, room is left for a large degree of independence of those elements that are not so controlled. I agree with the suggestion, but think that it raises the spectre of a serious difficulty for a view according to which linguists in fact

would help Devitt's case. Without further argument, the worry would remain that only a pedantic distinction could be drawn between the projects of studying the structure of thought and studying the structure of language. Third, as has often been urged, there are numerous reasons for thinking that the structure of thought alone can't sustain the distinctive properties of language. In particular, the properties of linguistic competence, and the linguistic properties the competence respects, appear idiosyncratic relative to other elements of cognition, and its objects. Ironically, if that is right, then it provides some reason for thinking that, despite mutual determination between cognition in general and linguistic competence, the study of competence is partly independent from the study of cognition in general. But it provides no support for the claim that there is a failure of mutual determination between linguistic competence and language. And it provides no support for the claim that the study of language enjoys independence from the study of competence.

5. *Bees.*

Let's return to the bee dance. What would it take for there to be failure of mutual determination in that case?

Well, suppose we thought that the bee dance could profitably be studied without appeal to any information about bee competence. Suppose, for instance, that we had been told that, sometimes and for whatever reason, bees waggle in this, that, and the other way (well, the view that they *waggle* is already somewhat competence-theory laden, but let that pass). The project might be akin to a sort of puzzle, as when we ask students in the abstract how a presented series of numbers is to be continued. In pursuing this project, the practitioner aims to come up with an elegant characterisation of the relevant properties of the bee dance. And then, deploying the

prioritise the study of language over the study of competence. For linguists appear to show no interest in elements of language that are not determined by elements of competence. Of course, no such problem arises for a view according to which linguistic facts are exhaustively determined by competence facts, but competence facts outstrip linguistic facts. And the latter view has some independent plausibility. But as far as I know, Chomsky has never claimed that one might learn all there is to know about linguistic competence by studying the grammar that it determines. He has always allowed, for instance, that facts about the physical realisation of competence might go beyond those revealed by the study of grammar.

“respect” constraint, we use their characterisation as the basis for claims about bee competence: bees must be able to produce movements with the relevant properties. That would, admittedly, be a very thin account of bee competence. We might think, in those circumstances, that provision of an elegant characterisation of the bee dance left almost everything to play for with respect to the competence from which the dance issues.

Alternatively, suppose we thought that bee-dance competence could profitably be studied without appeal to any information about bee dancing. Again—and setting aside the obvious qualms about this being a study of bees’ competence to *dance*—we might think that success in that endeavour left everything to play for with respect to relevant properties of the bees’ dance.

Of course, either approach would be silly. No serious inquiry into properties of bee dance competence would be undertaken in isolation from information about bee dances. And no serious inquiry into properties of bee dancing would be undertaken without appeal to information about bee competence. What enabled Von Frisch to crack this particular code is that he had access, not only to how bees danced under normal circumstances, and how they danced under abnormal circumstances. He also—and crucially—had access to information about how other bees were able to make use of the dances with which they were presented. It is only because Von Frisch was able to compare properties of the bee dances with properties of spectator behaviour that he was able to get a view about the *relevant* properties of the dance. Anyone with a penchant for puzzles and a free afternoon could come up with an elegant characterisation of bee dances. Von Frisch won the Nobel Prize because he was able to come up with the *relevant* characterisation: the one the bees make use of.

6. Language and Competence.

As Devitt is keen to emphasise, the bee dance analogy is only an analogy. We should not, therefore, expect all its properties to transfer to the case of language and linguistic competence. But it seems to me that the cases are, in this respect, relevantly similar.

If Linguists attempted to study the products of linguistic competence—noises, hand movements, etc.—independently of studying the ways in which competent speakers are able to exploit those products, then respecting the “respect” constraint would be quite unrevealing as to the nature of linguistic competence. And if Linguists

studied competence while disregarding the products of that competence—e.g., the fact that the relevant properties of speakers are those responsible (in broad terms) for facility with bits of speech—then the determination of linguistic properties by properties of the competence would, again, be useless as a guide to studying the linguistic properties.

But that is *not* how the Linguist proceeds. Rather, the Linguist studies the properties of products of competence only as those properties are exploited by speakers, as revealed for instance in their intuitions about meaning, acceptability, etc. And the Linguist studies competence only insofar as it is taken to shape speakers' appreciation of the relevant properties of their products. So, there is no immediate reason to think that there are really two different projects here.

Hence, we need additional reason to think that there really are two different projects here. That is, to repeat, we need reason to think that one of the following views is correct:

(α) Linguistic competence properties and linguistic properties are not mutually determining because substantive claims about competence are bound to outstrip what is determined via the “respect” constraint.

(β) They are not mutually determining because substantive claims about linguistic properties, of a sort made by Linguists, are bound to outstrip what is determined by facts about competence.

(γ) Despite mutual determination, competence properties or linguistic properties enjoy explanatory (or some other sort of) priority.

7. Does mutual determination fail?

Since I don't think Devitt wants to rest his conclusions on anything like (β), I shall ignore that option.⁷ Instead, I want to look very briefly at (α) and (γ), beginning with (α). Suppose that we had a detailed account of the properties of linguistic products to

⁷ The discussion at the end of section 4 bears on the upshot of Devitt taking up that option.

which we are responsive, so an account of their grammatical structures and the like. And suppose, moreover, that we had an account of the rules that generate those structures—again, not just any old rules able to do the job, but the rules that actually guide our performance. What would be missing?

Well, potentially, quite a lot. We might, for instance, lack a detailed account of how those rules are put to use in real time engagements with linguistic strings. And we might lack information about the detailed architecture, and neurological implementation, of competence. But few Linguists would claim that it is their immediate aim to fill that sort of gap in our knowledge. Although there has been some discussion about such issues, and about whether Linguistics itself furnishes results of the required sort, I don't think Devitt really aims to engage in that discussion. After all, his major opponent here is Chomsky. And Chomsky has never made sufficiently ambitious claims about the reach of Generative Linguistics for him to count as an opponent in that dispute.

Perhaps, then, Devitt thinks the reach of Linguistics is less extensive than I have allowed. Perhaps he thinks that it can give us an account of properties of linguistic products, but can't offer reasons for favouring one system of grammatical rules over another. For familiar reasons, that would be a mistake. Unless Devitt is prepared to limit Linguistics to studying superficial properties of *actual* productions, he has to allow that Linguists can make substantive claims about the bases of those productions, in the form of claims about the systems of grammatical rules that guide their production. For absent such an account, we really have no idea how we should project from properties of observed products to properties of unobserved products, or potential products. We would have no idea how to characterise those portions of language that have not in fact been used.⁸

8. Explanatory priority.

Let's leave that issue in the air, and turn to issues surrounding (γ). Perhaps Devitt wants to argue that, although the relevant range of psychological properties and the relevant range of linguistic properties are mutually determining, still there are issues

⁸ For detailed discussion see Schiffer (1993).

of explanatory (or other) priority to be decided. And perhaps he thinks that they are to be decided in favour of linguistic, rather than competence, properties.

I think there are important issues in this area. And I think the precise answers to them depend upon, for instance, exactly what one hopes to explain. But I want to suggest two reasons for thinking that such issues, as they arise with respect to Linguistics, are likely to fall against Devitt.

Recall that we are presently assuming mutual determination. Hence, we are assuming that, if our aim is merely to describe the properties of language or competence, there is little or nothing to choose between starting with language and starting with competence. But for at least two reasons, we might think that competence has explanatory priority.

The first reason is that linguistic competence is part of human psychology more generally. That provides reason to hope for unification amongst theories of the various aspects of human psychology, including linguistic competence, and a consequent deepening of our understanding. By contrast, it is not clear to me how the study of linguistic properties is to be unified with other domains, except via the dogleg through competence.⁹

The second reason is that, unless we isolate linguistic properties through their connections with one or another type of competence, we are apt to face the following difficulty. Since we would be conceiving of languages and linguistic properties as autonomous objects of inquiry, the domain of inquiry would appear to include, not only French and English, but also Frenglish, a language involving some mix of the properties of French and English in a way that contravenes our best present account of Universal Grammar. The question we would then face is: Why does no one acquire a competence to recognise the ‘sentences’ of Frenglish on the basis of ordinary development? Why is there no human able to reliably track the properties of Frenglish, e.g. able to recognise its ‘sentences’?¹⁰ And the answer to that question cannot be that there is no such language as Frenglish, at least on the assumption that

⁹ Alternatively, if Devitt is right about the subvenience base of linguistic properties, it is not clear to me how the study of linguistic properties is to be unified with other domains, except via the dog-leg through thought. Although I do not think that Devitt is right, I don’t think that the question impacts in any straightforward way upon the major issues about explanatory priority.

¹⁰ It is crucial to the case presented that Frenglish would *contravene* UG, rather than e.g. fitting UG disjunctively as might the competence of a bilingual speaker of French and English.

languages are not individuated through being indexed to ranges of competent speakers. The most reasonable answer is surely that no one acquires a competence to recognise Frenglish ‘sentences’ because the grammar of Frenglish flouts UG constraints. And that would be no explanation at all unless the fact that a language flouted UG constraints could explain why no *competence* “respects” the properties of that language. As far as I can see, the only explanations of the fact that no one has facility with Frenglish that have any chance of working are those that view UG constraints as constraints on the space of humanly possible competences. Hence, they are explanations that accord priority to competence over language.

9. Spoils.

In summary, I’ve tried to do the following. I began by considering some possible outcomes for the apparent dispute between Devitt and, e.g., Chomsky. I suggested that, before we engage further in the apparent dispute, we should check that the dispute is genuine, and try to get a handle on exactly what the dispute amounts to. Then I suggested that it is difficult to reconstruct a genuine dispute from what Devitt says. For all he says, it seems that his view and Chomsky’s might be notational variants, or different determinations of a single determinable view. Finally, I briefly considered some ways in which one might try to reinstate the appearance of genuine dispute. I argued, in effect, that the attempt presented Devitt with a sort of trilemma. On the first horn, he can try to reinstate a potential dispute, by viewing the study of language as partly independent of the study of competence. But the view of linguistic inquiry that would emerge is unacceptable. On the second horn, he can try to reinstate dispute by foisting on his opponent very demanding views about what a substantive theory of competence would be like. But then his opponent would be a straw opponent. Chomsky neither thinks that the study of grammar tells us very much about the physical realisation of competence nor that the study of grammar tells one everything that there is to know about competence. Finally, on the third horn, Devitt can try to reinstate a dispute, on the assumption of mutual determination, by arguing for the relative explanatory priority of language over competence. But in that case, it is plausible that Devitt would lose the dispute.

About the present status of the controversy, Devitt writes as follows:

If...[my]...argument is mistaken, it should be fairly easy for...[my critics]...to say why. (2007, p.22)

It seems to me that Devitt attempts to argue for two claims: first that he is right about the object of Linguistics and, second, that Chomsky is wrong. In effect, I have suggested that he should, perhaps, be somewhat emboldened by his critics' failure to show that he is wrong on the first point. Insofar as Devitt aims only to support the claim that Linguistics involves the study of language, I think that he is right about the object of Linguistics. But I hope that his critics will find some solace in my suggestion that they are right, and he is wrong, with respect to his second point. Linguistics is just as much concerned with the study of linguistic competence. And to that extent, Chomsky is also right about the object of Linguistics.

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