IS UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR INNATE?

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Noam Chomsky is generally credited with introducing the notion of Universal Grammar into linguistics. However, similar ideas underpinned the Rationalist notion of language, in the research programme originated by Descartes. Indeed, the idea of language being in some sense universal to the species, and hence presumably partly inborn rather than entirely learnt, was noted by Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century. So it seems that we must ask the question: is the idea of Universal Grammar innate to linguisticians?

Circumstantial evidence to support this point of view abounds. At the risk of being accused of ethnocentricity, I shall look first at the linguistics of Chomsky, the linguistics we were brought up with. Initially it seems as though Chomskyan linguistics is a simple outgrowth of Cartesian rationalism, and Chomsky himself acknowledges the work of various scholars of that era. However, it is clear that this only takes place at a relatively late stage of development, c. 1966, by which time Chomsky's views are already formed. (After this time, with his mental settings already fixed, it is in fact impossible for Chomsky ever to change his mind again, even given overwhelming evidence).

How, then, can Chomsky's mind progress from the *tabula rasa* of an undergraduate to the mentality of the founder of modern linguistics? Some would say it is simply a result of the activities of the primary caregiver, in this case Zelig Harris. But evidently there is some disposition towards this process, a natural tendency which owes nothing to the work of the eighteenth century. In fact, given this assumption, we may look again at the work of the original Rationalist programme and see it instead as a manifestation of the powerful innate linguistics module.

Certainly we can marshal evidence which hints at the universality and innateness of the belief in Universal Grammar. Can we, however, prove it directly? I will attempt to take steps towards constructing such a proof, arguing from what has been called the "poverty of the syllabus". This attempts to address the problem of acquisition. The question is, how is it possible for students to acquire a notion of Universal Grammar when almost all the books written on the subject are tedious, inaccurate and/or incomprehensible? This is not to criticise the authors of these books; the problem is merely that the information transmitted to the learners is inadequate because the authors do not fully understand the way their own arguments are constructed.

However, despite this inadequacy of input, students of linguistics are still able to obtain an understanding of what Universal Grammar is supposed to be. It is, except in pathological cases, a perfectly valid understanding – remember that we must not judge it according to some ludicrous prescriptive notion such as 'correctness' or 'validity'. If a student has a notion of UG that we can recognise as such, we should not hesitate to call them a linguistician.

As a result of this, we may endeavour to deduce certain rules which govern the kinds of UG which the mind may justifiably construct. Recall that once the student has acquired an understanding of UG, they may in turn communicate it in a way which is recognisably distinct from anything they have previously read or heard. Based on a study of this kind of language, we speculate that Universal Grammar must be confusing, expressible in 1200-1500 words and have nothing whatsoever to do with any divine power.

In conclusion, then, our study of Universal Grammar remains at an exciting stage. As no two people have precisely the same understanding of UG, the potential for research is limitless. Perhaps someday we will truly know exactly what Chomsky and his followers were going on about, but in the meantime, let us merely be thankful for the fact that we are equipped with the faculty of Universal Grammar.