INNATENESS AND USAGE-BASED APPROACHES

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to provide an overview of the basic stance in usage-based theories towards the concept of innateness. To do this, of course, we first need a thorough delineation of this concept. That is why this paper will have two main parts to it. The first part will dwell on the topic of innateness and the whole paradigm of linguistic nativism. This outline will provide the necessary background for the subsequent discussion of several usage-based approaches. This second part will start out with some basic criticisms on the idea of innateness. Next, an alternative theory on the acquisition of language will be examined. Finally, a number of additional usage-based models with their own specific take will be presented.

2. Innateness and Generative Grammar

To know what the concept “innateness” really embodies in linguistics, we have to go back in history for nearly fifty years: the age of Noam Chomsky. This man revolutionized the field of linguistics as the father of generative grammar. He broke with contemporary traditions in structuralism and behaviorism, and approached the human language faculty from a more mentalistic perspective. Language was considered an internal property of the human individual, something Chomsky called “competence”. However, there are two different ways to interpret this concept. In an ontogenetic approach it corresponds to an individual’s knowledge of language, something that is dynamic and different for every single human being. The phylogenetic approach, on the other hand, is somewhat more abstract. It defines competence to be the innate faculty of language of the human species. This view implies the existence of some sort of static, built-in knowledge, common to the entire human race. So, the faculty of language was regarded a species property, and considered to be genetically determined, as “a part of our biological endowment” (4). Chomsky even talks about the language faculty in terms of a “language organ”: an expression of the genes with its own specialized function, like the circulatory system, for example. This comparison is made, because both do not require any active effort on the part of the individual. The acquisition of language simply “happens” to a human child.

This of course does not mean that external stimulation and contact with a natural language is completely irrelevant for language acquisition in generative linguistics. For Chomskyan linguists, one’s ontogenetic competence is always “generated” by the interaction of a hypothesized initial state and the course of experience. This initial state is called the language acquisition device (LAD). This represents that innate knowledge, which is immediately there at birth. It would already contain the necessary properties for language

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to develop further on. Furthermore, the complexity and diversity of the world’s natural languages are characterized as a mere superficial appearance. Essentially, they would be variations on a single theme, which all have a common ground: the LAD. This general perspective on language acquisition has been referred to as linguistic nativism.

Now, Chomsky’s linguistic nativism was an approach that broke with the earlier linguistic behaviorism in the tradition of Bloomfield. In this paradigm, the focus was mainly on external stimuli and responses of the human infant to account for the emergence of language. So, linguistic behaviors were regarded as mere responses, conditioned by external stimuli. This was not compatible with Chomsky’s new perspective, and an important question in the matter became whether contact and experience with a natural language was sufficient by itself to establish first language acquisition in infants. Nativists concluded that children seemed to know a great deal more about language than their primary linguistic data (PLD) – the experiential linguistic data children are able to access during their language learning years – could account for alone. Basically, the nativists concluded that “language could not be learned from the PLD.”\textsuperscript{2} This basic nativist claim is known as poverty of stimulus. In just a limited time span, an infant is able to understand words and concepts in such profound ways that almost go beyond description in language itself. It seemed miraculous how a child could master its mother tongue, in all of its complexity, in just a few years. This seemed particularly amazing, since efforts to describe natural languages had shown how their complexity made them nearly “unlearnable”.

As for the content of this innate knowledge of language, nativists have a specific logic that allows for the existence of an isolated grammar. Because nativism underlines the importance of innateness, it tones down the influence of external factors, such as the social context, the cognitive context of experience and the situational context of language use. Therefore, it “isolates” the faculty of language from its context, as a typical decontextualizing perspective on language. However, what the context inescapably has to provide is the lexicon of a natural language. After all, this is something that is completely dependent on the context in which a particular language is learnt. So, for Chomsky and his followers, this innate knowledge of language had to refer to the formal rules of language: syntax, grammar. Furthermore, since every natural language has its own typical grammatical rules, the actual content of the LAD had to exist on a higher level of abstraction. What this innate knowledge actually looks like is the holy grail of generative linguistics: Universal Grammar (UG). This is an initial state inside a human baby’s brain that is able to “generate” any human natural language. What specific language it will turn out to be for an individual is then dependent on the context in which he or she is raised.

With the fundamental theory and axioms of generative grammar in place, the next step was to somehow make the exact content of UG more explicit: what exactly is the innate knowledge that UG contains? To start this kind of research, two necessary conditions had to be satisfied: *descriptive adequacy* and *explanatory adequacy*. The first demands an accurate account of the properties of particular languages, the latter needs to show how each particular language can be derived from the same innate UG. During the 1980s a framework within generative linguistics, called *Principles and Parameters*, tried to satisfy both these conditions. The grammatical rules of particular languages were gradually decomposed into general principles and parameters of an innate and universal faculty of language. The standard analogy for conceptualizing what is meant is the “switch box”. Within this view, the faculty of language is compared to a network that is connected to a switch box. The switches then represent different principles and parameters (options) for UG. At birth, these switches are all still in their neutral state. This is the LAD in its most pure form. After all, it embodies everything, which is innate about the human language faculty. The input of experience will gradually set the switches in the right order to turn the infant into a trained native speaker. The particular choice of settings on the switch box then corresponds to, for example, English. However, a different choice of settings would have constituted Japanese, or another, French, etc. Through a simple adjustment of these settings, French could, for example, be deduced from English. Of course this is not meant literally, but only at the abstract level of their “grammar”. Hypothetically, two languages might even be identical in their grammar by some coincidence, however different they might be in their lexicon.

This was all very interesting in theory, but it wasn’t a step further into understanding the true core of UG. The different switches of the LAD had to be identified and “tagged”, so we might have a deeper understanding of that innate component of language. Therefore, extensive research had been done to discover what these underlying principles and parameters of natural language might be. Over the years a lot of suggestions have come up in the literature. Just some of these are the projection principle, the pro-drop parameter, the head-directionality parameter, and the ergative case parameter. The exact details of these principles and parameters will not be discussed, since they go beyond the scope of this paper.

More recently, the principles and parameters have been embedded in a new generative approach, called the *Minimalist Program*. This perspective claims the existence of a “perfect design” and an optimal functionality for UG. To prove this, it did away with all unnecessary constructs of the past. The LAD would only need two unitary levels of representation: the *Phonetic Form* (PF) and the *Logical Form* (LF). The link between these levels also had to be
“minimal”. In fact, this is a more cognitive perspective within generative grammar. Because the LAD would actually be embedded within other cognitive systems of our brain, these systems had to be able to interpret linguistic expressions somehow. This necessity would put *legibility conditions* on the LAD. The PF corresponds to necessary phonetic representations, imposed by the articulatory system and the perceptual system (our sense of hearing). This is because the specific design of these systems allows them only to interpret certain phonetic properties, but not others. In the same way, the LF corresponds to necessary semantic representations, imposed by the conceptual and the computational system. After all, the conceptual and the computational system rely on the faculty of language as a medium to express and interchange our thoughts. Thought is expressed in language, even bound to it somehow. Now, the Minimalist Program stipulates an ideal coordination between the LAD and all of these cognitive systems, making the LAD perfectly engineered as a code in our DNA. Language features that somehow seem redundant are explained by giving them an economic functionality. The principles involved in this case are *economy of representation* and *economy of derivation*. Finally, this approach has also eliminated the necessity for phrase structure rules entirely, in favor of a more ad hoc formation of syntactic features. It emphasizes two basic operations: *Merge* and *Move*. Merge is the alternative for phrase structure rules, and Move is regarded an alternative for transformations.

Now, the paradigm of generative linguistics is all in all a very elegant theory of how we acquire language, but there is certainly no consensus regarding the hypothesized innateness of our language faculty. Several linguists in the framework of usage-based approaches have often come to different conclusions from their observations, and they have quite a different take on first language acquisition in children and even on the genesis of language in our species. Several of these alternative views will be discussed in the following chapter.

3. Usage-based Approaches

3.1. Criticisms on nativism by Sampson

Sampson’s basic stance is that none of the arguments for linguistic nativism have any validity. He opposes both Chomsky’s argumentation and the ideas of more recent nativists, like Steven Pinker. He thinks that their reasoning is often based on false premises or logically self-refuting. In his article *There is no Language Instinct*, Geoffrey Sampson provides an overview of all the basic arguments for nativism. He attributes Chomsky with five in total: speed of language acquisition, age dependence, poverty of stimulus,
convergence among individuals, and language universals. None of these can claim any absolute truth, as Sampson aims to show.

If we were to claim that the speed of language acquisition is “fast”, for one, we should also be able to judge how long it would “normally” take one to learn a language without any innate knowledge. No plausible estimates are ever put forward, making the argument completely subjective and therefore redundant. Sampson also judges the argument of age dependence to be rather unconvincing. As nativists argue, the human language faculty seems to be governed by some biological clock, making it nearly impossible to still acquire a language in depth after puberty has set in. The well known case of “Genie”, on the other hand, seems to contradict the idea that natural language acquisition cannot occur after puberty. Genie was in fact a girl, who was isolated from any natural language until age 13. Yet, she managed to acquire a natural language afterwards. Now, for Chomsky and Sampson, the poverty of stimulus argument seems to be more like a matter of differing opinions. Chomsky claims that children acquire certain formal rules about language, even without ever having been exposed to proper examples in language use. Sampson, on the other hand, claims that children have access to more linguistic data than Chomsky tends to believe. Also, nativists have often assumed that “convergence among individuals” is legitimate proof for the existence of UG. Although individual’s PLD can vary widely in a language community, their inner language models (competence) are said to coincide surprisingly well in their structural properties. Sampson, however, finds that this is something we cannot really know for sure. In fact, disagreements about the grammaticality of certain constructions are quite common. Finally, nativists also consider the existence of language universals to be proof of innate knowledge of language. These universals are unnecessary structural properties that are shared by human languages the world over. Sampson considers this to be the best argument in favor of linguistic nativism. However, he does have an alternative explanation for the existence of language universals. Following Herbert Simon, he borrows the idea that complex systems with gradual evolutionary processes will always have a certain, hierarchical type of structure, for purely formal, statistical reasons. Sampson then claims that natural language itself could be the product of cultural evolution, rather than biological evolution.

Apart from Chomsky’s typical arguments, some people have claimed a connection in human beings between the language faculty and certain biological functions that seem to have specifications precisely for the goal of acquiring language effectively. These are the categorical perception of speech sound, the vocal tract shape and color vocabulary. So, here the argument of innateness enters the realm of evolutionary biology, by subjecting it to the theory of Darwinian evolution. Within this discipline, it appears that categorical perception is a biological mechanism that is tightly coupled to language. After all, voiced and voiceless
consonants are distinguished by voice-onset timing, yet below a critical value they are heard as the same. This makes it seem as though our biology has engineered our perceptual system so as to enable us to make these distinctions and as a consequence acquire natural language. Sampson, however, notes that other species have very similar categorical discrimination functions, too. Furthermore, he somehow reverses their logic. It’s not really because of our categorical perception that we were able to acquire natural language, but because we had already evolved categorical perception for some other, non-linguistic function, we were coincidentally able to exploit this capacity for the purpose of language.

Another biological adaptation that has been linked to the faculty of language is the shape of our vocal tract. Since it allows for the production of a greater variety of speech sounds than the vocal tracts of other primates, it appears yet again that our biological constitution was specialized for the production of natural language. After all, it only seems to be a disadvantage for survival purposes, since its physical constitution allows us to be choked to death. In the same way, Sampson argues that these features were biological adaptations for purposes other than human language. As an example, he refers to the fact that man’s capacity to produce voices deep in pitch is advantageous for defense, because deep voices scare away possible predators. A final biology-based argument for nativists is color vocabulary. Berlin and Kay (1969) claimed that there is a common system underlying the color words of particular languages. This fact has been interpreted by nativists as an example of the idea that our minds impose conceptual categories, which in turn would prove that language structure is innate. Yet, one might also say that this common underlying system is due to the human visual system. So, there would be biological universals at work here, but not linguistic universals.

Finally, Sampson also renders powerless a lot of more recent arguments that are put forward in Steven Pinker’s book ‘The Language Instinct’. I will shortly discuss three of them. The first one concerns “language mutants”. This is a term referring to a multi-generation human family, where certain individuals appeared to have a genetically determined disability specific to grammar. Although they were average in intelligence, they were apparently unable to generalize particular inflected forms into general grammatical rules. If this were true, grammatical structure would at least have to be innate to some extent. Another study of them, however, has come to show that many other (non-linguistic) skills were affected as well in these individuals. Moreover, they were observed to produce overgeneralization, which makes the nativists’ claim self-refuting. After all, overgeneralization is by definition the application of a grammatical rule, just in a context where it’s not necessary for some reason. Another nativist argument is that the logic of word structure seems to be built in from the start. An example for this is the headless compound sabre-tooth. Children seem to intuitively know that the plural form is supposed to be sabre-tooths, and not sabre-teeth.
Sampson, on the contrary, found that this phenomenon does not constitute a general rule at all. He mentions the examples of pinkfoot geese being called *pinkfeet*, and Blackfoot Indians being called *Blackfeet*. Finally, Pinker suggests that the relatively early acquisition of language compared to the acquisition of non-linguistic skills is another factor pointing in the direction of linguistic nativism. This would especially be the case, since much less complex abilities than human language are only learnt until much later. To contradict this, Sampson simply argues here that motivation might just be a more determining factor than complexity in the beginning. A child’s motive for establishing some form of communication with his caregivers must obviously be quite strong.

Sampson’s general conclusion is that there is no such thing as an innate language faculty or a “language instinct”. He does not provide an alternative theory to account for the acquisition of language in humans, although he does mention the idea that languages must be individually-learned products of cultural evolution. Michael Tomasello, for one, is another cognitive linguist who agrees with Sampson on this point. Furthermore, he does provide an alternative hypothesis, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

### 3.2. Michael Tomasello: an alternative approach to the acquisition of language

Inspired by the usage-based approaches of Langacker, Goldberg and Croft, Michael Tomasello has become one of the most outspoken critics of the UG theory. His viewpoints on first language acquisition go completely against the nativist ideas of Chomsky and other generative linguists. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to provide a basic outline of his general perspective here. First, the basic problems he has with the UG theory will be discussed. Afterwards, his alternative approach to language acquisition will become the main topic of this chapter.

The first problem of UG, Tomasello refers to as the *linking problem*. This suggests that the links between UG and any given particular language are too difficult to make. There would be too much variability across languages for any static and innate look-up table to function in the way it would need to solve the problem of linking. Another problem Tomasello has with UG comes from Karl Popper’s philosophy of science. More specifically, scientific theories and hypotheses would have to be falsifiable somehow, for the general purpose of scientific progress. After all, science shouldn’t be perpetually confirming existing theories, but rather constantly challenging them. This way, theories could be adjusted or refuted, whenever empirical observation made it seem necessary. However, Tomasello finds UG to
be an “extremely weak hypothesis” on this point. After all, it hardly seems to be a testable hypothesis, because there are very few precise formulations of what UG exactly embodies. Moreover, there’s a lot of disagreement about the very nature of the hypothesized innate knowledge in the field of generative linguistics itself. So, it’s hardly a consistent hypothesis. Nevertheless, in generative grammar there are some basic arguments concerning innateness to be dealt with: (1) the poverty-of-stimulus argument, and (2) the stipulated universal characteristics in all natural languages (parameters).

First of all, Tomasello argues that there would be no poverty of stimulus if language is regarded as “a set of symbolic instruments for directing the intentional and mental states of others” and if children are granted to possess some basic cognitive and pragmatic skills, like categorization, analogy, statistical learning etc. Tomasello (2005) says:

If one takes function into account (…) there is no poverty of stimulus since even the most abstract syntactic principles from generative grammar may be understood as emanating from the language users’ sensitivity to the communicative function of the pieces of language she is using. (191)

Secondly, the so-called “universals” would simply not hold when taking into account the more than 6000 natural languages in the world. According to Tomasello, even the most well-known proposed parameters for UG would impose an Indo-European structure on the world’s languages:

... Once we get away from European languages on the basis of which this parameter [the pro-drop parameter] was formulated, the correlations simply do not hold (…) the head-direction parameter (…) fares no better in cross-linguistic perspective. (187)

So, all in all, Tomasello considers UG to come in short as an explanation for first language acquisition. He believes his usage-based model of language acquisition to be more promising, which will now be discussed.

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Now, research has shown that children’s early language is mostly not based on any kind of grammatical abstraction. When confronted with novel verbs, children show a highly limited productivity with syntactic constructions, so they don’t seem to assimilate these new verbs to some higher, abstract level. This goes against the general idea of UG. Therefore, Tomasello proposes to use a different kind of methodology to examine these phenomena: observation of actual language use in actual communicative events. This is what usage-based approaches are all about. Following the conclusions of research and experiments in this domain, one might show how accumulated linguistic experience can actually account for the emergence of language. There is however – as Tomasello argues – a basic necessity before language can develop. This is the understanding of communicative intentions:

... it is only if a young child understands other persons as intentional agents that she can acquire and use linguistic symbols – because the learning and use of symbols requires an understanding that the partner can voluntarily direct actions and attention to outside entities (675).

Yet, this ability alone is still not enough to account for a sudden emergence of language. Non-human primates and some children with autism also have this basic ability, yet they don’t acquire natural language as a consequence. Therefore, this comprehension needs to be experienced with an already familiar form of life (the adult) as a functional grounding. This is what Tomasello calls joint attentional formats: a context “in which both child and adult have a common understanding of some delimited domain of experience (718).” In other words, these joint attentional skills come down to the ability to psychologically “share experience” with others. This capacity is to be found in human 1-and 2-year-olds, but not in other primates nor in children with autism. So, when this ability is present in a human child, the decoding of natural language can start. According to Tomasello, an essential characteristic at this fase is imitative learning. It’s a necessary behavioral pattern if language acquisition is to be solely based on experience. Here, the utterance is what has come to be called the most fundamental psycholinguistic unit of language. After all, 3-year-olds still seem to have very limited ability to go beyond what they have actually heard from others in past usage events.

Furthermore, the first linguistic creations by a child are referred to as holophrases: attempts to imitate complete adult utterances, which in actual fact often only manage to produce just

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one linguistic element. They can take many forms, not just corresponding to single words in adult language. “Frozen phrases”, for example, start off as holophrases and are eventually broken down into constituents: gimme-that, my-turn, etc. That’s when grammar begins to emerge. This kind of grammatical division demands an insight into the functional role of the different linguistic elements in a sentence. This observation necessitates children at this point to be making a “functionally based distributional analysis”:

Paradigmatic categories such as noun and verb (...) are formed through a process of functionally based distributional analysis in which concrete linguistic items (e.g., words or phrases) that serve the same communicative function in utterances and constructions over time are grouped together into a category. (...) Paradigmatic categories are thus defined in functional terms by their distributional-combinatorial properties: nouns are what nouns do in larger linguistic structures. (76-77)

When a child’s early grammar has been developed, its multi-word speech often consists of fixed expressions with one or more variable slots, which can be filled by several linguistic elements. These are called utterance schemas. Chomsky would probably interpret these as the application of the innate, abstract rules of UG. Tomasello, on the other hand, argues that these utterance schemas are item-based, and therefore completely dependent on experience. More specifically, he refers to them as a psycholinguistically represented inventory of verb-island constructions. After all, every verb seemed to have a unique set of utterance schemas at any given developmental period. In addition, the process of entrenchment was observed in language acquisition: something that had already been heard multiple times did not change anymore in its reproduction. As opposed to newly learned verbs, experiments have shown that there is no overgeneralization in frequent verbs. Eventually, in usage-based approaches, it seems to come down to an item-based organization of language learning, dependent on the PLD.

To explain the created slots, reference is made to “observed speech variation” in already familiar utterance schemas. Frequency is very important when it comes to this. Tomasello makes a relevant distinction between token frequency and type frequency. Token frequency is the kind of frequent use that helps an expression to become entrenched. This leads to fluency in using such an expression. Type frequency refers to the different forms and functions in which an expression is used. This is where the functionally based distributional

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analysis comes in. A critical mass of examples then might make it possible for the necessary abstractions to be made.

The main conclusion for Tomasello is that language acquisition develops ontogenetically and that it is not triggered by some innate language acquisition device. The relevant cognitive processes would be intention-reading and pattern-finding. However, this still raises some questions concerning the genesis of language. How does one account for the existence of natural language in the first place, if it is something to be learned by experience. Regarding this, Tomasello believes that:

[linguistic constructions] are constructed by communities of people historically, via processes of grammaticalization, and reconstructed by individual children ontogenetically. (...) Universals of language structure emerge not from an innate universal grammar, but rather from the simultaneous interaction of universals of human cognition, communication, and vocal-auditory processing in the process of grammaticalization (192).²

3.3. Bybee and an emergent usage-based grammar

Bybee’s view on grammar is largely compatible with the viewpoints of Tomasello, since he also acknowledges that the general cognitive capabilities of the human brain bring about language by analyzing the PLD. However, Bybee takes this idea a step further. He uses the same type of “lexical” representation in the mind of language users, but his theory is embedded in a more diachronic perspective, in contrast to Tomasello’s synchronically-oriented research. So, Bybee’s model aims to explain the nature of grammar by examining how grammar is created over time. Language change is therefore part of his argumentation.

Another important observation for Bybee is that natural language contains a lot of conventionalized word sequences. Some of these he calls “prefabs”, which include expressions such as ‘beyond repair’, ‘break of habit’, and ‘to need help’. These kinds of expressions appear to represent a very high percentage of our language use, and this has led to the conclusion that we must use quite a bit of memory storage in acquiring language. Bybee then considers these word sequences to be stored in memory as a fundamental unit.

and that experience consequentially allows for an exemplar representation with these constructions as the basic unit of morphosyntax. Hopper (1987), then, has proposed grammar might be “emergent” from experience somehow. Language would be a complex dynamic system “[that] does not have structure a priori, but rather the apparent structure emerges from the repetition of many (...) speech events.”

Yet, how do we connect these usage events and this diachronic perspective of language change (and the emergence of grammar)? Bybee does this by drawing links between the token frequency of expressions in language use and its well-documented long term effects on language. This effect can be summarized in three principles: the reducing effect, the conserving effect, and autonomy. The reducing effect shows how high frequency words and phrases undergo phonetic reduction at a faster rate. The conserving effect, on the other hand, shows that high frequency sequences become more entrenched in their morphosyntactic structure and resist linguistic changes, imposed by more productive patterns. This is why irregular verbs with a high frequency are able to maintain their irregular inflection. Autonomy, finally, shows that morphologically complex forms of high frequency can lose their internal structure over time and become non-transparent. So, language is to be considered a dynamic process where lexicology and syntax are intertwined from a higher point of view (a diachronic perspective). An example is the English construction “be going to”, which underwent an historical process of grammaticalization. Somehow, this inherent gradual evolution of language over time is not that different from the way how seemingly static rock formations are slowly eroded by water currents.

Now, this emergent exemplar grammar is portrayed as a vast, organizational network containing every single token of experience, classified. This would then constitute our internalized grammar. So, new tokens of experience would thereby continuously impact existing memory representations by either confirming or disconfirming existing exemplars. This is then how an exemplar grammar grows, and refines itself during language acquisition. Also interesting to note is that this model seems to provide a plausible account for why children learn their native language so fast. After all, an individual phrase experienced by an adult is likely to only have a small impact on the extensive clusters of accumulated exemplar representations, but for a young child, each new token of experience will have a greater impact on his representations. In conclusion, Bybee feels that grammar can’t just be some innate, abstract structure that underlies language use, because one cannot claim a strict separation of grammar and usage: “the processes that occur in individual usage events ... [in fact] ... lead to the creation of grammar, its change, and its maintenance within a society.” (Bybee 2006)

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3.4. Ronald Langacker and cognitive grammar

Langacker’s model of grammar draws on the cognitive abilities of our conceptual system. In his perspective grammar is indissociable from meaning, as even grammatical elements are attributed with some kind of conceptual import. Every verb is said to instantiate a process, for instance. Grammar itself consists of only three main elements in this model of grammar: phonological structures (forms), semantic structures (meanings) and symbolical links between the two. The grammatical rules here take the form of schemas. As expressions are once again the primary focus in this usage-based model, the grammatical rules are only a secondary product based on our conceptual abilities: they are schematizations of expressions. The whole grammatical structure is then a schematic symbolization of conceptual content.

Because of this conceptual unification, this cognitive grammar can be fully reduced to a bunch of configurations of symbolic structures (form-meaning pairings). These schemas contain concepts like trajectors, paths, landmarks, etc. This kind of grammar is not conceived to be some innate mechanism that generates natural language. It is conceptualized as an inventory of conventional structures that are readily available for categorizing expressions in online language use. As Langacker says:

In cognitive grammar, rules are (…) emergent rather than fundamental; instead of being separately stored or represented in the form of instructions, they are inherent in the system’s processing activity.10

3.5. Geeraerts: A Multifactorial Grammar

In variational linguistics, research is done on variational patterns that occur in actual language use. This mostly concerns patterns of preference between several alternative linguistic structures, which basically have the same semantic content. So, the results that this discipline puts out reflect some regional variation in language preference. As a domain of study, it has some strong affinities with sociolinguistics. Within this usage-based approach, however, all observations are made part of an intricate and vast model, where different (types of) factors jointly influence the nature of grammar: a multifactorial grammar. Lectical, semantic and pragmatic factors are all put together to see how they

constitute our language and our grammar. So, this is quite a synthetic view on language and, indeed, linguistics itself. It does not mean to discard any linguistic observations that might be relevant for understanding language and to account for the nature of grammar. The relative importance of different factors is carefully considered, in order to eventually explain variational patterns in language use. Methodologically, variational linguists prefer corpora and empirical research on language.

Yet, this focus on the context of language in all of its complexity is widely discarded in the paradigm of generative linguistics. Variational linguists, on the other hand, promote the importance of context, whether this be the social context of language, the cognitive context of experience, or the situational context of actual language use. Still, Chomskyan linguists have neglected these contexts for decades in favor of an isolated grammar.

As Geeraerts argues, however, the necessity to hypothesize innate linguistic knowledge inherently links up with the tendency to ignore the context of language. By taking a mile high view and looking at the history of linguistics over a significant amount of time, one can see how the field of linguistics comes in waves of decontextualizing and recontextualizing trends. Geeraerts considers Chomsky’s Universal Grammar to be the pinnacle of such a decontextualizing trend in linguistics. Somehow, Chomsky’s preference to discard the context of language could only have led to a linguistic theory claiming a genetic predisposition for language. This observation is not as irrelevant or redundant as it may sound. Somehow, a mere matter of preference in the object of study seems to influence the content and the “logical” conclusions of that study domain itself! So, how can we call some reasoning logical, if it is fundamentally based on a subjective preference? These considerations certainly seem worthwhile to consider. However, the same type of observation can probably be made for recontextualizing trends. So, maybe a healthy dose of doubt and uncertainty might just be appropriate here, so that we remain open for discussion on this point.

The actual internal logic that has led to an isolation of grammar is represented by Geeraerts as a chain of propositions. First, if language is not considered to be social, it would have to be genetic. Secondly, if language is genetic, the lexicon and semantics in general can be considered dead weight. Thirdly, if semantics and the lexicon cannot be studied in linguistics, one can only focus on structure: formal syntax. Finally, if linguistics should occupy itself with formal rules, the study of actual usage events is redundant. As a whole, this even looks like a self-affirming loop, a process that got stuck in circular reasoning. This might explain the dogmatic principles and the closed attitude of early generative linguists concerning these points.
4. Conclusion

When it comes down to the idea of innateness in linguistics, we can certainly say that there is a general consensus among all types of usage-based models to discount it. Yet, considering the arguments of Geeraerts, this might just be not too surprising. Just like the neglection of contextual factors appears to beg for some genetic predisposition for language, usage-based research might naturally lead us towards a more developmental conceptualization of the emergence of language. Yet, if we would let go of any methodological preference, we might just be able to create a more unified model that transcends any form of nature-nurture controversy.

References


