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*Liberty and language* . . . alluded to a number of fundamental difficulties in contemporary linguistics which, in a book primarily concerned to make a political case, I was not able to analyse in detail . . . The present book, accordingly, attempts to discharge my debt to the discipline by attacking its various failings in a straightforward, properly documented, and responsible manner instead of backhandedly, and by compensating for this attack with an account of what I take to be the way towards a truer understanding of the relation between language and mind. (Preface)

Sampson objects to linguistic supports for innateness claims, or what he calls the ‘non-creative’ and ‘limited’ view of mind, that the mind just ‘trot[s] out one or another of an inventory of ideas with which we are all endowed from birth. Individual minds are, as it were, branches of a supermarket chain rather than artists’ studios’ (7). This view is attributed to Chomsky and is contrasted with a view that our minds are unlimited and have no genetically determined structure, that we ‘create our ideas *ex nihilo*’ (8).

*Making sense* offers two attacks on arguments for the nativist, non-creative, supermarket view, one based on semantics and one based on syntax. Chapters 2–4 deal with semantics and are concerned with some feature analyses, the componential analysis of word meanings, and Fodor’s (1975) notion of a universal conceptual language, arguing that in this domain linguists like Fodor have assumed rather than offered support for their nativist view of mind. There is much discussion of words which have changed their meaning (like gay), and of the conceptual problems raised by people who undergo a sex-change operation. One major point is a plausible one: we cannot predict how words will change their meanings or how words may be coined to suit new inventions and circumstances. From this Sampson concludes that ‘there cannot be a *science* of language’ [Sampson’s emphasis] and thus no scientific consequences from the study of language. I simply do not understand how this premise could lead to this conclusion, any more than how biologists’ inability to prophesy future evolutionary adaptations could lead one to argue that there can be no science of biological heredity.

However, ‘Sampson advances his newest, most refreshing, and most damning arguments’ (blurb) in the area of syntax (Chapters 6–9). Here the arguments are quite different: Chomsky’s ‘syntactic universals’ stem not from innate properties but from the fact that structures conforming to these universals happen to have been ‘invented creatively’ by all children acquiring their first language. This is explained by the fact that any complex entity must have an internal hierarchical organization, as a matter of statistical necessity (135). Hierarchical structures are more accessible and stable, more likely to be achieved and perpetuated. Given the requirement for a generally hierarchical
structure in grammars, Chomsky's innateness claims are simply unnecessary. This notion is based on Simon (1962) and will be familiar to readers of this journal: Chapters 6–9 reproduce most of Sampson (1978) but do not go beyond the earlier paper in any significant way.

Sampson develops the idea first in the context of the evolution of language. The bulk of Chapter 7 speculates that language originally consisted of one-word utterances. So up might mean that somebody had gone up something, that the honey was high up on the ledge, etc. (148). Later generations strung these words together into phrase-length utterances, then to clause-length, and so our modern languages gradually evolved. Of course, there is no direct evidence for or against this view, as Sampson is careful to point out, but it is a curious idea that primitive people might utter up or mountain or John, with up 'meaning', perhaps, 'John went up the mountain', while they could not utter the complex John up mountain. Furthermore, if language did develop in this way, I am puzzled why chimpanzees and other animals did not develop the relevant hierarchical structures; it has nothing to do with their genetic structure because genetic structure plays no rôle in these domains, under Sampson's creative view.

This historical notion is then translated into the synchronic claim that a language's structure makes use only of the independent utterances of earlier generations. This mean that 'verb phrases' must be dispensed with because they seem not to be independent utterances. It takes just one paragraph to banish VP because Sampson knows of only one rule of English grammar, S→NP VP, where 'VP' appears to the right of the arrow (160), and, after all McCawley (1970) questioned the validity of the category. The fact that a VP node is needed for the scope of quantifiers, and the pervasive notions of 'c-command' and 'government' to come out right is not worthy of comment. Presumably things can be reformulated in a VP-less grammar of English, but we are given no hints. 'Transformational rules will be interpreted historically as processes by which sentence-constituents come to change their form after being incorporated into larger constituents. Once, we may suppose, our ancestors would have said something like "This is the book; my brother lent the book to Mary" ' (161). Then a creative spirit in a later generation hit on the idea of a relative clause. 'One might suggest that the trick of moving the relative pronoun to the beginning of the relative clause could have been introduced in order to make it more obvious which of the noun-phrases of the relative clause referred to the antecedent in the main clause' (162). So during the evolutionary process human language was gradually built up in this way. So much for phylogenesis.

In Chapter 8 Sampson turns his hand to ontogenetic development, a very different matter. Here his task is to show that, given only the mathematical probability that there will inevitably be some generally hierarchical structure, exposure to normal linguistic experiences suffices to trigger in children the structures that they in fact achieve. As for the structures eventually achieved,
Sampson assumes the correctness of most of the universals proposed in the recent work of Chomsky and he sets out to explain these universals in his non-nativist framework, armed only with Simon’s demonstration of necessary hierarchization.

There were fundamental flaws and misunderstandings in *Liberty and language* (see Lightfoot, 1981) and the wise and intelligent reader will be wary of the promises made for its sequel. Not surprisingly, these errors recur in *Making sense*, several of them in Chapter 8. Here we are told that Chomsky’s child acquires its first language by hypothesis-formation, just as a scientist discovers a theory of molecular structure or whatever (168). Chomsky’s naïve native speakers are supposed to possess ‘reliable conscious [my emphasis – DWL] knowledge about theoretical issues’ (171). With views like these, ‘Chomsky’ is a sitting duck, as in *Liberty and language*. Even in an extended discussion of what Chomsky supposes to be the major difficulties for an inductive approach to language acquisition, Sampson focuses on the degeneracy of the stimulus and fails to appreciate that innate principles are not just common, shared properties, but properties postulated to circumvent poverty of stimulus problems, i.e. where there are no data available to the child which will suffice to establish some rule or principle which holds of the mature system (see the Introduction to Hornstein & Lightfoot (1981)). This misconception is fundamental and consequently Sampson himself fails to address poverty of stimulus problems in his ‘alternative’ theory, and fails to give an account for why ‘obvious’ inductive generalizations are not in fact adopted by children. For instance, if one can say *I want to go* alongside *I wanna go*, why can one not say *who do I wanna go?* alongside *who do I want to go*? If one can say *they expect Max to be here* and *they expect that Max will be here*, why can one not say *they expect that each other will be here* alongside *they expect each other to be here*? The recent generative literature is full of such examples and people postulate innate principles which prevent these inductive generalizations from being made and which permit an account of how language acquisition might take place under normal childhood conditions. Adapting the Simonian view, Sampson can hold that it is a statistical certainty that children will acquire a hierarchical grammar, that non-hierarchical grammars will not arise; but this comes nowhere close to accounting for the principles in the literature, which are what Sampson sets out to explain.

The climax of the book is Chapter 9 and pages 181–187 are a veritable tour de force. Here he ‘analyses’ away ‘the range of alleged syntactic universals that Chomsky has in mind; . . . I believe that my treatment is close to if not completely exhaustive’ (181). I shall simply cite two examples in full to illustrate the level of argument.

1. **Downgrading rules**

A related point is the claim that natural languages permit ‘upgrading’
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transformations (which move a constituent out of a subordinate clause into a superordinate one) but not ‘downgrading’ transformations (which do the reverse). For Chomsky this is an entirely arbitrary finding; *a priori* it could equally well have turned out that downgrading rules occur and upgrading rules do not. In evolutionary terms, however, the finding is fully predictable. An upgrading rule corresponds to a case in which a community created a new utterance-type by manipulating the elements of lower-level units already established in their language. A downgrading rule would correspond to a case in which the community creates an utterance-type by manipulating the elements of a larger construction yet to be invented by their descendants, which is an obviously nonsensical idea. (184; footnotes omitted)

The point of Chomsky’s discussion of down-grading rules was not that they do not occur. They do occur, but only where they do not result in a ‘trace’ at surface structure with no c-commanding antecedent (Chomsky, 1975: 106–111). In any case, Sampson’s argument confuses evolutionary and ontogenetic concerns; it goes through only if one assumes that children develop structures which must closely reflect their historical emergence. Sampson takes this view explicitly and claims later (see below) that a child’s developmental stages reflect the evolutionary steps of the organism. If we translate this assumption into the physical realm, we would suppose that what is conceived in a mother’s womb is a Neanderthal, ape, fish or some other evolutionary ancestor, which then quickly runs through the evolutionary stages to acquire its normal mature characteristics.

2. TRANSPARENCY OF INDEFINITE NPS

One point that might well seem wholly arbitrary and unpredictable (and therefore suitable as the premiss of an argument for linguist nativism) is that indefinite noun-phrases are ‘transparent’ with respect to extraction of elements but definite noun-phrases are not; thus *Who did he see a picture of?* versus *Who did he see the picture of?*, *Who did he see John’s picture of?* [footnote omitted]. But this distinction follows rather naturally from considerations already introduced. Simon’s argument suggests that transformations applying in the construction of an element at a given level will tend to avoid interfering with the internal structure of independently-stable elements at lower levels; and an element is ‘independently stable’ if it has or once had a use as a complete utterance. I suggested on p. 159 above that noun-phrases have many uses as complete utterances; but the functions I quoted... are all normally fulfilled by definite noun-phrases, and it is surely true that indefinite noun-phrases are much more rarely useful in isolation. It is very plausible to suppose (though, admittedly, quite unprovable) that the category ‘definite noun-phrase’ is historically older than the category
‘clause’, but that indefinite noun-phrases arose only as parts of clauses, and
the occasional utterance of an isolated indefinite noun-phrase (e.g. Richard
III’s A horse! A horse!) is a phenomenon post-dating the evolution of the
clause. If so, then definite noun-phrases alone ought to be opaque to
extraction, as Chomsky finds. (186)

If we distinguish evolutionary from ontogenetic claims, this argument needs
no comment. Admittedly, Sampson apologizes from time to time about these
arguments: e.g. ‘this first attempt to apply the evolutionary approach contains
some links of arguments that are weaker than others’ (192) But encouraged by
these successes, he moves on to re-analyse the major principles of Ross’ thesis
(3 pages), Greenberg’s universals (2½ pages), and Keenan & Comrie’s
accessibility hierarchy (3 pages).

The final chapter tells us that young children ‘build [their grammars] up step
by step, always using the elements they have mastered so far as basic building
blocks when investigating the next level of complexity’ (208). No sources are
cited for this view but it too can be explained on the evolutionary-functional
approach if we assume that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny: languages have
evolved gradually, we are told, and ‘this evolution of structure from initial
structurelessness cannot have been a genetic process but must, on the
evidence, occur afresh in the mind of each human individual.’ Again, we are
left to wonder why this development does not take place in a young chimpanzee,
if it has nothing to do with the properties of the organism.

Making sense reads easily and the reader is not slowed by technical
discussion. As in Liberty and language, Sampson’s ‘Chomsky’ is often hard to
recognize; in any case, the alternative theory presented here will need much
more work before it can circumvent the poverty of stimulus problems which
motivate the nativist claims to which it is supposed to be an alternative.

Meanwhile, if this is the ‘straightforward, properly documented, and
responsible’ linguistic support for the free market economy, the political
heroes of Liberty and language must look elsewhere for their ideological
underpinnings.¹

[¹ The political heroes were those whom Sampson mentioned: Margaret Thatcher, Sir Keith
Joseph, Friedrich Hayek, Sir Karl Popper et al. A reference in my review to the ‘nouveaux
philosophes’ touched Sampson’s francophobic nerve and provoked a remarkable reaction (‘a
note on ‘Liberalism’ and the ‘New Right’’, JL 17. 350–351), where he claimed that I had
saddled him with the ‘uniquely offensive and immoral’ views of Alain de Benoist and
Bernard-Henri Lévy. These people were not mentioned in my review or in Liberty and language.
In similar vein, my reference to the ‘New Right’ might have conjured up the image of Jeremiah
Denton, the present Senator from Alabama, who is reported to hold that adultery should be
treated as a capital offence (Economist 3–9 October 1981). One could go on. There are many
extraordinary views held by the ‘nouveaux philosophes’ and members of the so-called ‘New
Right’.

Since it seems to be necessary, let me specify that I have no desire or reason to saddle
Sampson with any extraordinary ideas other than those mentioned explicitly in the review.

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After many years as something of a poor relation, the rehabilitation of dialectology as a legitimate discipline seems well under way. Indeed these two surveys of the field, which have appeared almost simultaneously, argue that the dialectologist's concern with variability in language is central to many of the issues facing general linguistic theory. On the whole linguists have tended to abstract away from the rather messy picture presented by actual usage and to devise theoretical models to account for the artificially uniform language systems thus set up. Recently, however, there has been a change and an increased readiness to recognize that since in real life the 'same' language does vary enormously from one speaker to another, and even within the speech of one individual, theoretical models able to cope with such variation must be developed. Here, it is claimed, is where dialectology comes in.

The two surveys are broadly in agreement as to the nature of the field and the ground to be covered. Both devote some attention to the problem of defining such terms as 'dialect', 'language' and 'accent' and they come to the same general conclusions. They argue that the popular view of dialects as substandard forms of a superior standard language is mistaken, and that all varieties should be considered equally valid. Furthermore, social dialects which vary according to the class, age or sex of the speaker are just as important as regional dialects which vary from one area to another. Having defined the field in these fairly broad terms, they both consider in some detail three different approaches to dialect study: first traditional dialectology, with its interest in regional variation, its preoccupation with finding speakers of 'genuine dialect' uncontaminated by the standard language, and its use of uniform questionnaires to carry out major surveys over wide areas; then modern urban dialectology, with its rather different concern with the way