

SIL Electronic Book Reviews 2009-003

Skeptical linguistic essays

By Paul M. Postal

New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. 424. paperback \$55.00. ISBN 978-0-19-516671-2 (paperback), 0-19-51667-1X (paperback).

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The book contains fourteen ‘skeptical essays,’ all of which are meant to illustrate Postal’s premise that “much nonetheless prestigious current linguistics has in fact made very restricted descriptive and explanatory progress and, in some areas where great things have been claimed, no real substantive progress at all” (p. 3).

The essays are grouped in two roughly equal parts. Part 1, ‘Studies in Linguistics’ (chapters 1-6), contains a collection of essays on English syntax, showing (claims to the contrary notwithstanding) that we are still far from a serious understanding of English grammar. Part 2, ‘Studies of Junk Linguistics’ (chapters 7-14), exposes substandard practices in the discipline under three main headings: junk syntax, junk ethics, and junk reasoning.

The introduction briefly surveys the book chapter by chapter devoting about a paragraph to each. Nearly fifty pages make up the endnotes, followed by an extensive reference section of nineteen pages. By contrast, the index is disappointingly sparse and most topics are not sub-classified. For example, ‘transformational grammar’ counts 27 references, including footnotes, but has no subtopics to go with them. The longest entries are for Chomsky and Postal, but again without any subtopics these are not particularly useful. One notable exception in this regard is the entry of ‘metagraph grammar’ which has multiple subentries, most of them with only one page reference.

Another weakness, in my opinion, is that there is no explicit mention of the book’s intended audience. With the exception of chapters 4 and 5, the syntactic discussions presuppose a high level of familiarity with theoretical issues and—although Postal himself no longer subscribes to this view—especially with generative grammar.

Part 1 begins with the longest essay, chapter 1, ‘A Paradox in English Syntax.’ Citing three constraints, Bresnan (an advocate of lexical functional grammar) had previously argued convincingly that the initial prepositional phrase in sentences such as ‘Under the table was lying an elderly crocodile’ is a subject at the functional level. Postal counters with an extensive list of non-subject properties of these phrases. Both analyses cannot be right. Behind the apparent paradox lies a false assumption that the three constraints examined are restricted to subjects. Skepticism is called for: one must be sure to carefully examine counterevidence before

concluding X. A good part of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of Postal's version of relational grammar which he calls Metagraph Grammar.

Competing grammatical frameworks (government binding, lexical functional grammar, and head-driven phrase structure grammar) all claim that the raising of complement subjects to main clause complements is impossible. In spite of this, in chapter 2 ('A Putatively Banned Type of Raising'), Postal argues that 'him' in 'You can depend on him to do something decent' is an example of precisely that, thus proving again that "enormous skepticism is justified with respect to current syntactic claims and conclusions" (p. 108).

Turning to generative grammar, chapter 3 ('A New Raising Mystery') opens up an old debate between Postal and Chomsky (among others) on the status of nonfinite complements (as in 'Lydia wants *Ken* to succeed'). Postal argues that this is not only a subject of the complement (which is Chomsky's view) but also an object of the main clause, in the process seriously challenging Chomsky's generative type of grammar.

The main point of chapter 4 ('Chromaticity: An Overlooked English Grammatical Category Distinction') is to document a hitherto overlooked distinction. It is the one between what Postal calls non-chromatic (colorless or semantically light) nominals, such as 'something, whatever, stuff, when,' and chromatic nominals, such as 'some fox, what fox.' Even though there is no overt morphological marker, there is even syntactic evidence of chromatic agreement. Any grammar that does not take this distinction into account cannot be considered complete.

An analysis of slang can prove beneficial for our understanding of standard English. That is the conclusion of chapter 5 ('The Structure of One Type of American English Vulgar Minimizer'). In focus is 'squat' and other (more 'vulgar'!) expressions, as in 'Olmstead doesn't understand squat about topology.' The analysis presented is shown to impact a more standard syntactic form involving 'nothing.' Again, there is still much that is unknown even in such well-studied languages as English.

In the concluding chapter of the first part, chapter 6 ('The Openness of Natural Languages'), Postal challenges a fundamental tenet of generative grammar, namely that all sentences are finite and are formed from a fixed, finite vocabulary. Nonlinguistic noises, foreign phrases, gestures, and pictures are all possible elements of a well-formed grammatical sentence. This has theoretical ramifications, undermining the foundations of generative grammar.

The title of Part 2 is 'Studies of Junk Linguistics.' With this term Postal has in mind a kind of pseudo-linguistics epitomized by—but not restricted to—Chomsky's generative theory. The essence of junk linguistics is "to advance pretensions to the discovery of some truth(s) about NL [Natural Language–DK] in the absence of any such discovery" (p. 322). This is illustrated first in two chapters on junk syntax.

The first of these, chapter 7 ('Junk Syntax 1'), concerns claims by Chomsky (in 1981) that so-called 'strong crossover effects' (first discussed by Postal in 1971) support his binding principle C. New objections are presented in addition to those already found in the literature. Postal argues that Chomsky flouts minimal standards of scholarship. Besides, grand claims were made in

passing—another reason to be skeptical. The second, chapter 8 ('Junk Syntax 2'), concerns passive constructions. Although passives have been much in focus in generative grammar, Postal argues that their treatment is marked by distortion of known facts, unwarranted strong-sounding claims, vague undefined principles, and more.

The only previously published essay, chapter 9 ('Junk Ethics 1: Advances in Linguistic Rhetoric') is a satire about the 'sophisticated bluff' that marks junk linguistics. Common rhetorical devices include: 1) 'the Phantom Principle Move' (invent some principle name and say that the facts follow from it, even if you have not formulated it yet), 2) 'the Sophisticated Interpretation Move' (say that an opponent's analysis only violates the *letter* of your principle but not its *spirit*), and 3) 'the Epistemology of Desired Error Move' (claim X and add that you expect, even welcome, counterevidence). Sample quotations from Chomsky and others prove these devices are indeed in vogue.

Junk ethics is apparent even in refereeing, as seen in chapter 10 ('Junk Refereeing: Our Tax Dollars at Work'). Since the referee remains anonymous, 'the black art of refereemanship'—as Postal calls it—is particularly prone to junk ethics, allowing one to get away with making unsubstantiated remarks and personal attacks. Analyzing a referee's comments on an article he himself once submitted, Postal asks what it means to reject a submission for being 'one-dimensional,' 'notation-crunching,' or 'mechanical.' Undefined, these might just as well be considered positive properties. He concludes: "Believe me, esteemed reader, if the need arises, you can adopt this approach and apply it to reject any proposal you wish" (p. 295).

Chapter 11 ('Junk Ethics 2: The Most Irresponsible Passage') further illustrates the point. Line by line Postal examines a passage by Chomsky in which the latter purports that the Faculty of Language is a component of the mind, one that we study 'more or less' the same way as we study the immune or digestive systems. 'Irresponsibility' is evident from the author's failure to cite alternative frameworks, use of empty rhetoric, as well as inner inconsistencies and false logic—all of which is exacerbated by the author's influential status in linguistics.

Junk linguistics also manifests itself in junk reasoning, the topic of the next two chapters, chapters 12 and 13. Watch out for these much-abused terms in the literature: 'automatically,' 'virtually,' and 'natural.' They are empty compliments employed to hide the fact that one has no real discoveries to show. Another favorite phrase in generative (or its successor, minimalist) grammar is '(virtually) conceptually necessary.' The entire chapter 13 is devoted to an analysis of this phrase. Though much employed, it too is 'mere propaganda.'

Just over a page in length, chapter 14 ('Junk Linguistics: The Bottom Line') concludes Part 2. The bottom line is that junk linguistics is "a kind of pollution of the scholarly environment" (p. 337) and whether we are students, writers, or publishers, we should all be on guard against it. Postal's final advice to students is: "Beware. Be skeptical!" (p. 338).

In conclusion, here is obviously a brilliant mind, who has devoted his life to the study of English syntax and discovers that there are still many unanswered questions for English. Field linguists, take heed! When you have produced a grammar on some obscure minority language, even written a dissertation, remember that you have really only begun to scratch the surface. As Postal

mentions on his homepage, the possibilities for original research in the field of linguistics are vast indeed, so beware of territorialism.

Finally, this volume is a call for true scholarship. Postal observes: “To the extent that a real linguist provides actual discoveries, they will impose themselves by their truth and will induce no felt need to gild them with empty compliments” (p. 322). This demands careful attention to details and a humble acknowledgement of your own limitations. Even if you cannot follow all the arguments, you can’t escape the sense that Postal exemplifies this kind of scholarship.

References

Paul M. Postal. URL: <http://linguistics.as.nyu.edu/object/PaulMPostal.html> (23 January, 2013)

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