

LINGUIST List 31.903: Review: Syntax: Kertész, Moravcsik, Rákosi (2019)

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TITLE: Current Approaches to Syntax

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SUMMARY

“Current Approaches to Syntax: A Comparative Handbook” of the Comparative Handbooks of Linguistics Series of De Gruyter Mouton is a reference book edited by András Kertész, Edith Moravcsik and Csilla Rákosi. It aims to provide a systematic comparison of various contemporary syntactic approaches and encourages metatheoretical reflection for practitioners of syntactic research. The 600-page book consists of 21 chapters and two parts. The Introduction by Edith Moravcsik starts with discussing how to compare syntactic frameworks and why it is desirable to undertake this endeavour. The chapter also outlines the four parameters for the comparison of syntactic theories: “goals”, “data”, “tools” and “evaluation”, which all the authors of the chapters in Part I were asked to apply as headings. Section 3 of the Introduction “Parameters of metatheories” was written by Csilla Rákosi. This section discusses the necessary congruities and possible differences between metatheories of syntax. Section 4 of the Introduction provides some sample comparisons among theories on the basis of the internal organization of syntax (levels), of grammar (components) and of cognition (modularity). The conclusion to the Introduction discusses conflict resolution as an additional parameter of theory comparison.

Part I of the book is entitled: “Approaches to syntax” and contains thirteen chapters written by practitioners of the relevant syntactic theories. Due to space limitations, I will not be able to provide a summary of each chapter in this review. As noted, all these chapters contain the same four main subsections. Each chapter also involves a sample

(partial) analysis of the same sentence: “After Mary introduced herself to the audience, she turned to a man that she had met before”. My evaluation in the next part will be focused on the volume in general and on the Introduction and Conclusions; therefore, if I have any specific comments on the chapters, I will note them here.

Chapter 2 written by Cristiano Broccias is on Langacker’s Cognitive Grammar (CG). The chapter mentions a crucial issue, which is also relevant for the whole book as I will further elaborate below, namely, the challenge of testing theoretical claims with psycholinguistic data. It also acknowledges the unclarity as to whether the processing described by Langacker is from the perspective of the speaker or the hearer. Chapter 3 is on Construction Grammar (CxG) and is written by Rui P. Chaves. In Chapter 4, Peter W. Culicover and Ray Jackendoff present their “Simpler Syntax” (SS). Chapter 5 by Mary Dalrymple and Jamie Y. Findlay introduces Joan Bresnan and Ron Kaplan’s Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG). In Chapter 6, Sam Featherston describes the Decathlon Model. Chapter 7, written by Norbert Hornstein is entitled: “The Stupendous Success of the Minimalist Program”. In this chapter, Hornstein clarifies the objectives of the Minimalist Program (MP) and argues that it has been successful in meeting these goals. The message of the chapter is expressed clearly, occasionally with a humorous style. One addition that would help the reader would be to include the references to the studies which criticize MP, as examples of its hostile reception, so that one could locate and read these criticisms directly. Chapter 8 written by Ray Jackendoff and Jenny Audring is on “The Parallel Architecture” (PA) of Jackendoff. In Chapter 9, Ritva Laury and Tsuyoshi Ono introduce Usage-based Grammar. Chapter 10, entitled “Optimality-theoretic Syntax” is written by Géraldine Legendre. In Chapter 11, J. Lachlan Mackenzie presents The Functional Discourse Grammar (FDG) approach to syntax. Chapter 12 written by Stefan Müller and Antonio Machicao y Priemer is on Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG) which was developed by Carl Pollard and Ivan Sag. In Chapter 13, Timothy Osborne presents “Dependency Grammar” (DG). Finally, Chapter 14 by Mark Steedman introduces Combinatory Categorical Grammar (CCG).

Part II of the volume, entitled “Metatheoretical foundations” contains 6 chapters. Chapter 15, “Syntactic knowledge and intersubjectivity” is written by Philip Carr. Chapter 16 written by Esa Itkonen is entitled: “Hermeneutics and generative linguistics”. Chapter 17, “The uncertainty of syntactic theorizing” by András Kertész and Csilla Rákosi presents a metatheoretical model which uncovers the mismatch between the research practice of generative linguistics and the self-image of generative linguists. Chapter 18 entitled “The multiparadigmatic structure of science and generative grammar” is written by Stephan Kornmesser. Chapter 19 by Peter Ludlow is entitled: “The philosophy of generative linguistics: best theory criteria”. In Chapter 20, “The research programme of Chomskyan linguistics”, Pius ten Hacken defines the concept of a research programme and applies it to Chomskyan linguistics and selected competing frameworks. The chapter is clear and convincing in its presentation of what constitutes a research program. On the other hand, in the discussion of the alternatives to grammaticality judgements, it only refers to early psycholinguistics experiments, ignoring the vast recent literature. As I will explain in more detail in the next section, recent developments in psycholinguistics, especially regarding the now well-established structural priming phenomenon (Bock 1986, Pickering & Ferreira 2008, Branigan & Pickering 2017 among others) have exciting consequences for syntactic theorizing. Structural priming constitutes a more direct source of information for mental syntactic representations than grammaticality judgements. This would have implications for ten Hacken’s conclusions that “By their nature, however, psycho- and neurolinguistic data do not replace the kind of data that can be gathered from grammaticality judgements and corpora” (p. 559) and that “... it is in general hard to link any actual experiments directly to the form of the grammar” (p. 566).

The final chapter of the book is Chapter 21, “Conclusions: On the use of the comparison of syntactic theories” by András Kertész and Csilla Rákosi. In this chapter, the authors provide a historical outline of the philosophy of science in relation to linguistic metatheorizing leading towards “metatheoretically reflected object theoretical research”.

In conclusion, the chapter suggests a number of questions for reflection for each of the four parameters used in this volume and outlines the factors that have shaped the relationship between metatheoretical reflection and object-theoretical syntactic research.

EVALUATION

The editors of this volume succeed in the challenging endeavour of providing a systematic comparison of the contemporary theories of syntax. The four parameters for comparison which the authors of all the chapters in Part I follow help the reader to see the similarities and differences between frameworks clearly. In addition, the editors also ask the authors of these individual chapters to provide an analysis of the same sentences, which is very useful for the assessment of the analytical approaches.

The intended target audience of the volume consists of grammarians, philosophers of science and cognitive scientists. Indeed, the book is of great interest for any researcher working on syntax and linguistic metatheories. However, it may not be particularly suitable for beginners of syntax and undergraduate linguistics students, as it would be helpful to have some familiarity with at least one of the contemporary theories of syntax as well as some knowledge on the history of generative grammar and a basic grasp of the main concepts in the philosophy of science.

The editors have been objective and impartial regarding the specific competing theories. The chapters in Part I appear in alphabetical order on the basis of the authors' last names. The fact that each chapter in this part has the same four parameters as headings does indeed provide common grounds for comparison for the reader as noted above. It is also very interesting to observe that some sections are relatively longer or shorter in certain chapters and that they tend to have different subsections. There are unavoidably some overlaps and cross-references among the various chapters as individual authors also sometimes compare their own approach to that of others. The main strength of the book as a whole is that it encourages linguists to engage in metatheoretical reflection and self-criticism, which should be crucial for any practitioner of research on syntax.

The goal of metatheoretical self-reflection becomes even more evident in Part II. In fact, reading this volume feels like reading two really good books that complement each other very well. The chapters in Part I give an idea about the range of existing theoretical frameworks and provide introductions into their respective theories, which already encourages metatheoretical reflection. The chapters in Part II, on the other hand, are different in nature than those in Part I in that Part II is explicitly metatheoretical in scope. The chapters in Part II discuss the theories on the theories of syntax and relate the object-based syntactic research to the philosophy of science.

The Introduction to the volume presents the goals of the book very clearly and lays out the parameters of comparison. Section 2.1 describes the necessary congruities and possible differences between approaches with respect to the parameter "goals". I believe that this section would have been more comprehensive if two issues were mentioned in more detail.

The first issue relates to the "psychological reality" of syntactic theories. Certain chapters address this issue directly and this is a topic that comes up throughout the book. The Introduction states that "If we assume that syntax is, minimally, about the way words are selected and linearly ordered in sentences, all syntactic theories must account for the selection and ordering of words" (page 2). It is not completely clear in this definition whether this refers to the actual cognitive processes or some sort of abstraction. The terminology here is very similar to that in Levelt (1989)'s model of language production, for example. Is a distinction to be made here between the verbs to generate and to produce (as mentioned in Chapter 15 on page 433), possibly also related to the competence-performance distinction? This stance also seems to reflect the speaker's perspective, if so, what about the parsing/processing/comprehension of syntax by the listener? Although point 4 on page 4 mentions "cognition", a more clear presentation of the relationship between syntactic theory and psycholinguistic research would be

desirable, as this would also have implications for the “data” paradigm.

The other issue on which the Introduction could have elaborated further is the topic of “language universals”. Although point 3 (page 4) mentions “crosslinguistic context”, theories may differ with regard to whether they aim to arrive at linguistic universals or focus solely on grammars of specific languages. As this is another topic that is discussed in various chapters in the book, it may have helped to also address this in more detail in the Introduction. As for section 3 of the Introduction, it would have been helpful to provide a brief review of some basics such as Popper’s falsificationism and the standard view for readers who may be unfamiliar with these concepts which are crucial for understanding the chapters in Part II. In fact, as I will explain below, it would have been more desirable to have such a small introductory section at the beginning of Part II.

The Conclusions chapter makes metatheoretical reflection more prominent as a goal of the present volume. While the Introduction focused more on the comparison of theories, the emphasis shifts towards metatheoretical reflection in the Conclusions. Section 2 of the Conclusions chapter provides a brief overview of the historical development of the philosophy of science. As this section is very informative for readers who may not be familiar with the subject, it would have been more helpful to have it at the beginning of Part II instead. It would really make it easier for the reader to interpret the chapters in Part II if there were some sort of introduction to basics such as Popper’s falsificationism, logical positivism, the Standard view and Kuhn’s work at the beginning of this part. Such a section would also make the transition between Part I and Part II smoother.

The Conclusions chapter also involves a discussion of the methodology in linguistics. There is a very important self-criticism for linguists regarding the “discord between the practice of linguistic research and the self-image of linguists” (p. 576) and the misunderstanding of metatheoretical reflection for decades. The section also involves a summary of the insights related to the acknowledgement of the pluralism and uncertainty of data. However, as I mentioned above, with regard to Chapter 20 in particular, the discussion of data types throughout the volume fails to mention “structural priming”, the tendency to repeat grammatical form (Bock 1986, also see Pickering & Ferreira 2008 for a critical review) which is a direct psycholinguistic source of information for linguistic theories. I find this surprising given that this phenomenon, which was introduced more than 30 years ago, is very relevant to the context of the volume and that it is now widely accepted in the literature. Structural priming is a sound, implicit psychological alternative to explicit acceptability judgments (Branigan & Pickering 2017, also see open peer commentary in the journal “Behavioral and Brain Sciences”). Branigan and Pickering (2017) reject the traditional division which assumes that it is the linguists’ task to study the representation of language whereas the role of psycholinguists is to study language processing. They indicate that most research on representations has been carried out on the basis of acceptability judgements (which is also evident in the present volume). The authors explain the limitations of acceptability judgments and argue for the use of structural priming as a more psychologically grounded source of data. They also state that structural priming has reached a state of methodological maturity now, which enables them to present an outline theory of syntax based on structural priming data. The inclusion of this new syntactic approach in comparative handbooks of syntactic accounts such as the present volume will definitely make the relevant psycholinguistic literature more accessible to syntactic theoreticians in the future.

Overall “Current Approaches to Syntax: A Comparative Handbook” is an excellent reference book which I highly recommend to every linguist working on syntax. As the editors indicate, it would enable practitioners of specific syntactic theories to gain knowledge about the work carried out in different approaches. This would undoubtedly facilitate communication across frameworks and lead to better mutual understanding. The volume encourages readers to open up to new possibilities and expand their horizons. The four parameters provided by the editors do indeed facilitate systematic comparison among theories. As such, it is also a valuable resource for educators who

would like to present their students with the wide range of syntactic frameworks available, in advance syntax graduate courses, for instance. Similarly, psycholinguists and cognitive scientists carrying out data-driven research, who would like to test which theory's predictions match their experimental data the best, would also benefit from this reference book. Although the inclusion of more relevant psycholinguistic work which shares the same goal of describing "the selection and linear ordering of words in sentences" would have led to fruitful discussions, the book is still of great interest to cognitive scientists and psychologists working of language and syntax. Indeed, the volume motivates readers to follow the work in related disciplines regardless of what their background may be.

The most prominent strength of the book is that it promotes "metatheoretically reflected object theoretical research". It illustrates the importance of metatheoretical reflection for grammarians very convincingly. The sort of self-reflection on both scientific methods and metatheories, which is suggested in this volume, would certainly help improve research practices of individual syntacticians. To conclude, "Current Approaches to Syntax: A Comparative Handbook" is a must-have reference book that would be a valuable addition to the libraries of syntacticians, philosophers of science and cognitive scientists interested in the study of grammar.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Gözde Mercan is a psycholinguist with a PhD in Cognitive Science from Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey. Her research focuses on the processing and mental representation of language, mainly through the structural priming paradigm. She has conducted structural priming experiments on various linguistic forms in Turkish, English and Norwegian with monolingual and multilingual participants. She is also interested in language acquisition in children and adults. Currently, she is an (external) affiliate of the Center for Multilingualism in Society across the Lifespan of the University of Oslo.

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