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ABSTRACT

There are several well-known arguments for including linguistics in a liberal arts education. Linguistic theory can be presented as an experimental science in which it is particularly easy to do experiments. In addition, it is a field so new that, in an introductory course, areas about which little is known can be reached in some detail, with students themselves providing crucial evidence. An argument that has received less attention is that linguistics provides important evidence about human nature as exemplified in language. When this approach is taken in the classroom, the student gains a much greater respect for the complexity and richness of the human mind and learns to question the simple-minded views that underlie much contemporary psychological, economic, and political reasoning. (MSE)

LINGUISTICS IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

APPENDIX 4-K

Some Thoughts on the Role of Linguistics
in a Liberal Arts Education

by

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The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the LSA or the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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PREFACE

The Linguistics in the Undergraduate Curriculum (LUC) project is an effort by the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) to study the state of undergraduate instruction in linguistics in the United States and Canada and to suggest directions for its future development. It was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities during the period 1 January 1985-31 December 1987. The project was carried out under the direction of D. Terence Langendoen, Principal Investigator, and Secretary-Treasurer of the LSA. Mary Niebuhr, Executive Assistant at the LSA office in Washington, DC, was responsible for the day-to-day administration of the project with the assistance of Nicole VandenHeuvel and Dana McDaniel.

Project oversight was provided by a Steering Committee that was appointed by the LSA Executive Committee in 1985. Its members were: Judith Aissen (University of California, Santa Cruz), Paul Angelis (Southern Illinois University), Victoria Fromkin (University of California, Los Angeles), Frank Heny, Robert Jeffers (Rutgers University), D. Terence Langendoen (Graduate Center of the City University of New York), Manjari Ohala (San Jose State University), Ellen Prince (University of Pennsylvania), and Arnold Zwicky (The Ohio State University and Stanford University). The Steering Committee, in turn, received help from a Consultant Panel, whose members were: Ed Battistella (University of Alabama, Birmingham), Byron Bender (University of Hawaii, Manoa), Garland Bills (University of New Mexico), Daniel Brink (Arizona State University), Ronald Butters (Duke University), Charles Cairns (Queens College of CUNY), Jean Casagrande (University of Florida), Nancy Dorian (Bryn Mawr College), Sheila Embleton (York University), Francine Frank (State University of New York, Albany), Robert Freidin (Princeton University), Jean Berko-Gleason (Boston University), Wayne Harbert (Cornell University), Alice Harris (Vanderbilt University), Jeffrey Heath, Michael Henderson (University of Kansas), Larry Hutchinson (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis), Ray Jackendoff (Brandeis University), Robert Johnson (Gallaudet College), Braj Kachru (University of Illinois, Urbana), Charles Kreidler (Georgetown University), William Ladusaw (University of California, Santa Cruz), Ilse Lehiste (The Ohio State University), David Lightfoot (University of Maryland), Donna Jo Napoli (Swarthmore College), Ronald Macaulay (Pitzer College), Geoffrey Pullum (University of California, Santa Cruz), Victor Raskin (Purdue University), Sanford Schane (University of California, San Diego), Carlota Smith (University of Texas, Austin), Roger Shuy (Georgetown University), and Jessica Wirth (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee).

I think it is probably the case that linguistics is never going to be a giant undergraduate major at any university. The best one can hope for is a relatively small number of dedicated linguistics majors. Hence, from the point of view of university administration, a faculty of linguistics likely cannot justify its existence on the basis of the number of its undergraduate majors. Nor is an administration likely to offer enthusiastic support to linguistics just because the faculty happens to be brilliant in the field. Rather, the typical scenario seems to be, at best, that the administration approaches linguistics with some vague good will (linguistics is known as an up-and-coming field, or was in the seventies--now I'm not so sure) but with little idea of what linguistics is really about. If one is lucky, there will not be any institutional hostility from departments of literature or anthropology or education or other places that have a residual claim on the field.

In order to persuade an administration and one's nonlinguist colleages that linguistics deserves the institutions's support, then, it is necessary to have good reasons for linguistics to play a role in undergraduate education beyond its value as a major. If at all possible, this role should be regularized within general university distribution requirements. That is, the presence of linguistics in the university must be justified much more on the basis of the introductory course than is the presence of more traditional departments such as philosophy or psychology or of more financially rewarding departments such as computer science.

There are a number of arguments for linguistics in a liberal arts education that I think are fairly well known. One that I am fond of (but which must be used with care, as it it is often hard to get across to someone who has not taken the course) is that linguistic theory can be presented as an experimental science in which it is particularly easy to do experiments. Making linguistic judgments and coming up with examples and counterexamples can confront a student with the nature of scientific theorizing at zero cost in equipment and minimal cost in time. Thus it is possible to deal almost immediately with the genuine problems of how the scientific enterprise is conducted, revealing a methodology that goes against many of the stereotypes one has been handed about the so-called "scientific method." Doing linguistics, even at an introductory level, can be an important exercise in critical thinking and empirical investigation.

At the same time, linguistics is new enough that in an introductory course one can reach in some detail many areas about which little is as yet known, with students themselves providing crucial evidence. This is again important, because most

introductory science courses are presented as bodies of established results--and this is the way students are urged to understand science. (Alternatively, in fields like genetics or astrophysics, the approach to currently outstanding questions is experimentally complex and remote from anything the student could expect to experience him/herself.) In my own courses, I have found students astonished when I answer their questions with "We don't know yet." It is important that science be seen in this light, as an ongoing enterprise in which we are trying simultaneously to frame the issues and work out their empirical consequences. Linguistics,even at an elementary level, can be a wonderful vehicle for this.

A deeper reason that linguistics is important to the liberal arts enterprise, and one that I think has received less attention, is that it provides important evidence about human nature--not just about language per se, but about human nature in general as exemplified by the facts of language. What I have in mind is this. There is a strong current in the lore of our culture that sees human beings solely as the product of their environments, as being taught essentially everything they know. I am not sure how this is conveyed to the young; but in my experience if you scratch an undergraduate (or in fact any layperson) you invariably find a behaviorist. Along with this--and more pernicious--goes a rigid social Darwinism to the effect that all so-called human values are relative and are set by the environment. For example, in economics, the facile assumption that people are driven by selfish or greedy motives alone and that satisfaction of one's own desires is the only defensible human value is taken to lead to the conclusion that "the market is always right"--whatever happens is a consequence of the law of survival of the fittest. I hope I needn't document the effect on current events of such ideology, a caricature of scientific objectivity.

What does this have to do with linguistics? The major result of generative linguistics, I believe, is that knowledge of a language is (1) highly complex, (2) for the most part unconscious, i.e. nearly opaque to introspection, (3) largely unlearned. These points can be presented in a lecture or two, but they are made far more real to the student through a rigorous introductory linguistics course that confronts the puzzles of linguistic knowledge and digs and digs at them for weeks on end, so that the student has actual personal experience with the facts.

As one goes along in the course, one can then begin to ask, If such a relatively basic element of human culture is so complex and so different from the stereotype given by the lore, what about the rest of human nature? For example, since cultural conventions, like principles of language, are used creatively and often without conscious effort, to what extent must they be

represented as unconscious mentally instantiated principles? To what extent are standard assumptions about culture as unjustified as standard assumptions about language? To what extent are cultural conventions learned and to what extent are they innate? How does a child acquire cultural principles that are not taught? To what extent are cultural artifacts such as ritual and even law governed by complex innate mental organization (that is more highly structured than, say, Darwinian, Freudian, or sociobiological theories would have it)? And so forth. The effect of such questions in the context of strong and palpable results in linguistics is to instill in the student a much greater respect for the complexity and richness of the human mind and to call sharply into question the simple-minded views that underlie much contemporary psychological, economic, and political reasoning.

The point of pursuing this approach is not to be able to provide a student with strongly justified alternative points of view on these crucial matters. It is only to make clear how wrong the standard assumptions are in the case of language and, by parallel reasoning, to raise motivated questions about the other areas. That is the most that linguistics <u>as such</u> can hope to provide. On the other hand, language is virtually the only part of human nature where these issues have been addressed. Thus, given this fact, and given the privileged status of language among our cultural equipment, it seems to me that one must take very seriously the linguistic arguments for innate unconscious knowledge, for rule systems as opposed to accumulations of facts or habits, and for learning without explicit instruction. It further seems to me that these arguments are powerful enough and rich enough in larger implications that they deserve to be part of every educated person's understanding of human nature. This is for me the central reason that undergraduates should be grappling with arcane details of phonology and syntax, and the reason I continue to care about teaching introductory linguistics.