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Diversity and the Connotations of ‘Universals’: Comments on Gleitman

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As a linguist taking part in the Chicago Humanities Institute (CHI) symposium, I was startled to realize that a massive semantic shift has occurred in the language used in other departments of the humanities, affecting words the meaning of which I thought I knew. The conversations and papers of many of my colleagues are replete with references to ‘discourse’, ‘text’, and other terms of art from my own field; the term ‘linguistic’ itself shows up in such puzzling (to me) collocations as “the linguistic fallacy.” It was, of course, evident from the context and from further conversation with my colleagues that ‘text’, ‘discourse’, and the like have acquired additional layers of significance in literature departments and elsewhere in the humanities, beyond their technical meanings in linguistics. But, as a linguist, I cannot help getting interested in questions of language use and variation. Consequently, at the same time that I was hearing about the issues that engaged my colleagues at CHI, I was also listening to the language they were using, trying to understand what these terms borrowed from linguistics meant in the context of contemporary literary criticism and philosophy. In other words, I found myself doing fieldwork with my colleagues as (unwitting) subjects: a dialect survey, of sorts, of what I learned at CHI to call ‘the academy’.

The theme of the first CHI symposium—“Universals/Essentialisms”—provided me with a further example of the discrepancy between the language of linguistics and the language used elsewhere in the humanities. In linguistics, ‘universals’ is a benign term, relatively uncontroversial. All linguists agree that universals of language exist, though naturally there is vigorous disagreement regarding the details of the form such universals take. Lila Gleitman, in her marvelously clear paper reproduced here, sketches some of the evidence for linguistic universals. First of all, there is the fact of language acquisition...
Children learn language rapidly, at about the same age, all over the world. The languages acquired by children differ, of course, in terms of the order of words, in the inventory of sounds employed, and in some of the categories (e.g., gender) marked on the words. But at a more abstract level of analysis, universals of linguistic structure are found in all areas of language: in the system of sounds, in the internal structure of words, in the combination of words into sentences, in semantics, and in the relation of sentences to the contexts of use.

The second half of the symposium theme, ‘essentialisms’, is not a term often heard in linguistics, but for our present purposes it may perhaps be equated with an innatist position on language acquisition, which Gleitman also argues for. The explanation given for linguistic universals of acquisition and of linguistic structure is that the capacity to learn language is innate, and the categories of linguistic structure are prefigured in the mind. The argument supporting this position is known as the poverty-of-stimulus argument. If a child were born with no innate predisposition for language and instead had to learn everything from the environment surrounding him, then there would be no explanation for the rapidity of language acquisition in children nor for the uniform ways in which acquisition occurs, and no explanation for the creative ability of speakers to produce and understand novel utterances. Furthermore, speakers agree on what is and is not a possible sentence of their language, even concerning matters which are never explicitly taught to them. The only explanation for the acquisition of language and for speakers’ knowledge of language is that the capacity for language is innate and structured in a particular way.

Gleitman has argued particularly strongly for an innatist position by studying acquisition in children deprived of certain environmental stimuli. That is, she has looked at blind children, who cannot see the objects or situations being named by their parents, at deaf children whose parents prevent them from learning sign language, and at extreme cases of child abuse, where children have been deprived of all linguistic stimulation. The results of all these studies support an innatist position on language acquisition. The blind children acquire the meanings of words normally, despite the difference in their environment. Deaf children who are not taught sign language make up their own gestural language, one which conforms to many of the universals observed in other languages. The abused children, however, vary in their ability to acquire language after being rescued. If the children are young enough (say, six years old), language acquisition may proceed normally. But older children, like Genie, who was fourteen when she was rescued, have passed the critical period for language acquisition and can speak only at the level characteristic of
normal two-year-olds. Gleitman’s paper, then, argues for an innate predisposition for language which is tied to the maturational process of the child: children begin producing utterances at roughly the same time, and the complexity of the utterances increases at roughly the same ages for all children; but if no linguistic stimulation is received during childhood, the ability to acquire language is lost.

Gleitman’s positions on universals and innateness have been accepted by the vast majority of the field. Nearly all linguists would agree that some sort of biological predisposition for language learning exists in humans, and that this predisposition explains many, if not all, of the observed universals of language. Now, this consensus among linguists regarding the existence of universals had never seemed remarkable to me until I became acquainted with the controversy engendered by ‘universals/essentialisms’ elsewhere in the humanities. For example, Martha Nussbaum begins her article in this volume with several striking anecdotes recounting recent hostile exchanges over the question of universals and essentialism. For those who are rabidly anti-universalist/essentialist, it seems, claiming that any property or condition is essentially human is elitist, racist, and imperialist. According to Nussbaum, not even the assertion that the eradication of smallpox is a good thing will go unchallenged.

Though none of my colleagues at CHI went to such extremes, it was clear that all the nonlinguists acknowledged that the positing of universals in their fields raises some troubling issues. For example, taking a universalist position in the field of literature might commit one to an elitist, exclusionary position, upholding a canon largely composed of European or Euro-American male writers. A further danger of universalist positions is that they might license a prescriptive attitude toward other cultures. To modify another example from Nussbaum’s article, one might characterize the attitude of some American women toward menstrual taboos in this way: they are offended by the idea of such taboos, would not put up with them in American society, and favor their elimination in other cultures as well, apparently without regard for the religious significance such taboos might have for women of the other culture. In other words, the American women in this example would be so convinced of the correctness of their own feelings, and that what is right for them must be right for all women, that they would seek to prescribe changes in other societies to conform to the model of American culture.

These negative connotations of elitism and prescriptivism are entirely absent in linguists’ use of the term ‘universals’, and it is worth asking why this should be so. To return to my earlier analogy of a dialect survey, there are at least three explanations that might be offered...
for the difference between the use of ‘universals’ in the community of linguists and its use elsewhere in the humanities. One (prescriptive) approach would be to say that there is a single term with a single meaning, but that one of the two groups is using it wrong. For example, the nonlinguists might feel that the way they use ‘universals’ is correct, but that the naive linguists have not yet realized the dangerous connotations of elitism and prescriptivism inherent in a universalist approach. As will be evident in the following discussion of linguistic methodology, I reject this position. Granted, linguists may be isolated from some of their colleagues in the literature departments, but we are neither naive nor backward when it comes to reflecting on how we do what we do.

A second possibility would be that ‘universals’ in linguistics and ‘universals’ elsewhere in the humanities is a case of accidental homonymy, like ‘bank’ meaning financial institution and ‘bank’ of a river. Despite the phonetic identity, the two terms refer to completely different phenomena, and no common ground can be found between the linguists’ conception of universals and that of the nonlinguists; the two groups have nothing to say to each other on this issue. I would also reject this position. I agree with the hope expressed by Gleitman in her conclusion that results achieved by research on universals in linguistics may serve as a model for other fields; as for linguistics, it can only profit by becoming more aware of the pitfalls associated with the invocation of universals in other fields.

Having rejected the first two possibilities, I am left with the third possibility: that ‘universals’ here is an example of what linguists call polysemy. In other words, there is a single term, ‘universals’, which has two related meanings. One meaning corresponds to the benign use of the term in linguistics; in its other sense, the term has acquired certain negative connotations of elitism and prescriptivism. The more neutral use of ‘universals’ may be taken to be the basic, historically prior one, with the negatively charged sense of the term a more recent development. Given this assumption, two questions immediately arise. First, how did the later, negative, sense of ‘universals’ develop in much of the humanities? And, second, what is different about linguistics? Why hasn’t the negative sense of ‘universals’ arisen in linguistics as well?

The answer to the first question, about the development of negative connotations of ‘universals’ in much of the humanities, is straightforward. Both elitism and prescriptivism are a consequence of an extremely narrow view of universals, one which is fundamentally opposed to diversity. That is, if universals (in literature, ethics, etc.) are asserted to be already known and established, then anything diverging
from the already-established universals is either not as good or ought to be changed to conform to them. The danger in such a view is obvious, of course: the putative universals may be established by a small elite, unduly influenced by its own traditions and culture, and unaware of the significance of the art or values of other traditions. The explanation for the negative connotations of ‘universals’, therefore, is to be found in the social and cultural context of the study of literature, art, philosophy, and other disciplines, and the perception that the canons of these fields are biased and exclusionary.

For nonlinguists in the humanities, accustomed by now to debates over political correctness and the like, the absence of such debate in linguistics must surely suggest that linguists as a group are hopelessly unenlightened and behind the times. But the answer to the second question I posed above—why hasn’t ‘universals’ acquired negative connotations in linguistics—is rather to be found in an examination of the nature of the field, the sort of questions that linguists ask, and the way we go about answering them. First of all, linguistics is a relatively young field, still in the process of discovering what the universals of language might be. We linguists are, therefore, free from the disadvantages that a centuries-old tradition can impose; we do not have to challenge an established set of putative universals. Nor is it possible to take a prescriptive approach to linguistic universals. (Imagine, for example, linguists encountering an unstudied language in the Amazon and telling the speakers they ought to add Latin case endings to their nouns.) Again, linguists are interested in discovering what the universals of language might be, not in changing anyone’s language. Second, in trying to discover the universals of language, linguists are gathering evidence from as diverse a group of languages as possible. Instead of a narrow, exclusionary view of universals as opposed to diversity, as sketched above, the universals proposed by linguists fundamentally depend upon a recognition of the diversity of the thousands of languages spoken in the world.

The “canon” of contemporary linguistics, if that term may be used, is surely the most diverse of all the fields of the humanities. Besides the non-English languages discussed by Gleitman (ASL, pidgins, and creoles), the well-educated linguist is expected to be familiar with linguistic phenomena from every continent: for example, the spreading of tone within words in African languages, the interaction of agreement morphology with verbal aspect in the languages of the Caucasus, the incorporation of nouns into verb stems in Greenlandic Eskimo, large-scale replacement of words in Australian aboriginal languages following the death of a member of the community, indication of empathy relationships in Japanese verbs, vowel harmony
in Hungarian and Turkish, anomalous case marking of subjects in Quechua and Icelandic, and “switch-reference” marking (indicating whether the subject of the following clause is the same as the current clause, or different) in Papua New Guinea and the Native American languages of the Southwest, to list only a few examples. Nor is the subject matter of linguistics elitist with respect to gender, ethnicity, or genre. The sociolinguistic work on women’s language and on African-American English is well known; as for genre, even children’s language games such as pig latin can reveal important facts about the underlying organization of phonology.

At the same time, the diversity inherent in current approaches to linguistics is able to inform new treatments of the languages which formerly made up the “canon,” such as Latin and Classical Greek. A dissertation now in preparation in the University of Chicago linguistics department illustrates this point nicely. Early in her dissertation on the syntax and discourse pragmatics of reported speech in Biblical Hebrew, Cynthia Miller introduces her analysis of Hebrew indirect speech by citing, among other things, studies on two South American Indian languages, Páez and Cuiva. Now, the fact that Páez and Cuiva are temporally and geographically far removed from Biblical Hebrew does not invalidate Miller’s use of these studies, nor does the presumed difference in register between the language of the Bible and the stylistic varieties of Páez and Cuiva from which the data were collected. Rather, the usefulness of the data from Páez and Cuiva here lies in the fact that particular structural analyses involving direct and indirect speech have been established for at least one human language; it is therefore not unlikely that another language would use a similar structural device to express the same function.

In the same way, Gleitman examines language acquisition in the most diverse populations imaginable—blind children, deaf children, abused children—and then brings the results of these studies to bear upon the question of language acquisition by sighted, hearing children growing up in normal circumstances. The feats of language learning which children are able to accomplish even when deprived of visual input, for example, are astonishing; Gleitman goes further and shows us how astonishing it is that any child, in any circumstances, can so readily acquire the meaning of everyday words such as ‘dog’ and ‘know’.

In conclusion, there is no necessary correlation between believing in the existence of universals and the negative connotations of elitism and prescriptivism which the term bears in certain fields outside of linguistics. What the results of linguistic research on universals show, in fact, is that given a “canon” that is broad enough and diverse
enough, it is possible to discover universals which are truly essentially human. The specific universal of the ability to acquire language, as argued for by Gleitman, is innate, part of the essence of being human, but at the same time it permits thousands of different variations upon the fundamental universals of language.