15 Minds in Uniform

How generative linguistics regiments culture, and why it shouldn't

Published as a chapter in Sampson and Babarczy, *Grammar without Grammaticality* (de Gruyter, 2013); an earlier version was the keynote address at IADA 2006, Mainz, and was published in Marion Grein and Edda Weigand, eds, *Dialogue and Culture* (John Benjamins, 2007). The present version contains a (very) few revisions by Sampson to the 2013 text.

15.1 Trivializing cultural differences

Practitioners of theoretical linguistics often think of their subject as exempt from the ethical implications which loom large in most branches of social studies. Publications in linguistic theory tend to share the abstract formal quality of mathematical writing, so people imagine that linguistics is as ethically neutral as maths. They are wrong. One of the most significant (if doubtless unintended) functions of modern generative linguistic theory is to create a spurious intellectual justification for a poisonous aspect of modern life which has become widespread for non-intellectual reasons: the trivialization of cultural differences between separate human groups. People nowadays do not merely see the cultures that exist today as fairly similar to one another (which, because of modern technology, they often are), but they fail to recognize even the possibility of deep cultural differences. They do not conceive of how alien to us, mentally as well as physically, the life of our predecessors was a few centuries ago, and the life of our successors in time to come may be.

Most people with this shortsighted outlook hold it out of simple ignorance But generative linguistics is creating reasons for saying that it is the correct outlook. Cultures really are not and cannot be all that diverse, if we believe the message of Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (Pinker 1995), and of the linguists such as Noam Chomsky from whom Pinker draws his ideas.

15.2 An earlier consensus

It is ironic that the linguistics of recent decades has encouraged this point of view, because when synchronic linguistics got started, about the beginning of the 20th century, and for long afterwards, its main function was – and was seen as – helping to demonstrate how large the cultural differences are between different human groups. The pioneer of synchronic linguistics in North America was the anthropologist Franz Boas, who was explicit about the fact that cultural differences often go deeper than laymen at the time tended to appreciate:

> ... forms of thought and action which we are inclined to consider as based on human nature are not generally valid, but characteristic of our specific culture. If this were not so, we could not understand why certain aspects of mental life that are characteristic of the Old World should be entirely or

> almost entirely absent in aboriginal America. An example is the contrast between the fundamental idea of judicial procedure in Africa and America; the emphasis on oath and ordeal as parts of judicial procedure in the Old World, their absence in the New World. (Boas [1932] 1940: 258)

It is indicative that, in Britain, the first chair of linguistics to be established was located at the School of Oriental and African Studies, an institution which had been founded to encourage study of the diverse cultures of the non-Western world. Standard undergraduate textbooks of linguistics emphasized the significance of structural diversity among languages as a mirror of intellectual diversity among cultures, for instance H.A. Gleason wrote ([1955] 1969: 7–8):

> In learning a second language ... [y]ou will have to make ... changes in habits of thought and of description of situations in many ... instances. ... In some languages, situations are not analyzed, as they are in English, in terms of an actor and an action. Instead the fundamental cleavage runs in a different direction and cannot be easily stated in English.

And this idea that human cultural differences can run deep was widely accepted as uncontroversial by educated people whose special expertise had nothing particularly to do with anthropology or with linguistics. To take an example at random from recent reading, when the historian W.L. Warren discussed the 12th-century Anglo-Norman king Henry II's dealings with the neighbouring Celtic nations of Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, he found it important to begin by explaining fundamental conceptual differences between Celtic and post-Carolingian-European world-views.

> Institutions (such as kingship) which look at first sight familiar were in fact differently put together and informed by different traditions and habits. We are so accustomed to seeing social institutions closely integrated with political institutions ... that it is difficult to comprehend the development of a far from primitive and reasonably stable society in which political institutions were of comparatively minor importance. ... [In England and Continental Europe] Political order was ... made the groundwork of social stability and progress. But this pattern was not inevitable. The Celtic world found an alternative to political peace as the basis for an ordered social life. (Warren 1973: 151–152)

15.3 Globalization concealing cultural diversity

In the 21st century, developments in our own Western societies have meant that the idea of deep differences between cultures is much less well understood. Joseph Henrich et al. have thought it necessary to shock readers into an awareness of how diverse the assumptions of different cultures can be (and hence how dangerous it is to base universal theories of human psychology on experiments using almost exclusively Western university students as subjects), by describing two societies of New Guinea:

> the Etoro believe that for a boy to achieve manhood he must ingest the semen of his elders. This is accomplished through ritualized rites of passage that require young male initiates to fellate a senior member ... In contrast, the nearby Kaluli maintain that male initiation is only properly done by ritually delivering the semen through the initiate's anus, *not* his mouth ... To become a man in these societies, and eventually take a wife, every boy undergoes these initiations. [Comparable practices] ... were not uncommon among the traditional societies of Melanesia and Aboriginal Australia ... as well as in Ancient Greece and Tokugawa Japan. (Henrich et al. 2010a: 61)

What for one culture is the ultimate wickedness can be in another culture the right and proper thing to do. (British forces in Afghanistan currently are having to be taught that paedophilia is a cultural norm in parts of that country: Farmer 2011.) There simply is not any universal social pattern of which separate cultures represent separate, perhaps imperfect realizations. As Henrich et al. (2010b) put it, those interested in human nature need to be made aware that "Most people are not WEIRD [Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic]".

We all know that there are many ways in which our modern circumstances make it difficult for people to understand the possibilities of cultural diversity. Because of technology, people increasingly live clustered together in towns – we understand that the majority of human beings in the world are now urban- rather than rural-dwellers, for the first time in human history – and modern media are tending to link the populations of the world together into a single "global village". Youngsters in different countries, whose parents or grandparents might have had scarcely any cultural reference points in common, nowadays often spend much of their time listening to the same pop songs and watching the same films. In the past, the chief way in which educated Europeans encountered the details of civilizations radically different from their own was through intensive study of the classics; you cannot spend years learning about ancient Greece or Rome and still suppose that modern Europe or the USA represent the only possible models for successful societies, even if you happen to prefer the modern models. But in recent decades the number of schoolchildren getting more than (at most) a brief exposure to Latin or Greek has shrunk to a vanishingly small minority in Britain and in Hungary, and (doubtless) elsewhere also. Perhaps most important of all, the internet and the World Wide Web have brought about a sudden foreshortening of people's mental time horizons. While the usual way for a student to get information was through a library, it was about as easy for him to look at a fifty- or hundred-year-old book as a two- or three-year-old one. Now that everyone uses the Web, the pre-Web world is becoming relegated to a shadowy existence. Everyone knows it was there, any adult remembers chunks of it, but in practice it just is not accessible in detail in the way that the world of the last few years is. And when Tim Berners-Lee invented the Web in 1993, urbanization and globalization had already happened. So, nowadays, it really is hard for rising generations to get their minds round the idea that the way we live now is not the only possible way for human beings to live.

If this is hard, then so much the more reason for academics to put effort into helping people grasp the potential diversity of human cultures. After all, even someone who is thoroughly glad to have been born in our time, and who feels no wistfulness about any features of past or remote present-day societies, surely hopes that life for future generations will be better still. We do not meet many people who find life at the beginning of the 21st century so wonderful in all respects that

improvement is inconceivable. But how can we hope to chart positive ways forward into the future, if we have no sense that there is a wide range of alternatives to our current reality? If external circumstances nowadays happen to be making it difficult for people to understand that cultures can differ widely, then explaining and demonstrating this becomes a specially urgent task for the academic profession.

15.4 Generative linguistics as a theory of human nature

Unfortunately, generative linguistics is doing just the opposite of this. Linguists like Steven Pinker and Noam Chomsky have been giving us spurious, pseudo-intellectual reasons to believe that human monoculture really is inevitable. And although, scientifically speaking, their arguments are junk, our modern external circumstances have caused them to receive far more credence than they deserve.

For a full justification of the statement that the generative linguistic theory of human nature is junk, we must refer readers to *The "Language Instinct" Debate* (Sampson 2005), already cited at various points in the present volume. Pinker and other generative linguists deploy a wide range of arguments to make their point of view seem convincing; *The "Language Instinct" Debate* goes through these argument systematically and analyses the logical fallacies and false premisses which in each case destroy their force. We have no space to recapitulate all that here. What matters for present purposes is to explain how the generative linguists' account of human nature relates to the question of cultural diversity.

On the face of it one might not see much link between a technical theory about structural universals of language, and ideas about the nonexistence of genuine cultural diversity with respect to vital areas such as law or government. A typical finding of generative linguistics (see e.g. Chomsky 1968: 51) is that grammatical rules in all languages are "structure-dependent", in the sense discussed on p. 244 above. So for instance, a language might have a grammar rule which turns statements into questions by shifting the main verb to the beginning, as many European languages have: the English statement *The man that you were talking about is in the kitchen* becomes the question *Is the man that you were talking about in the kitchen?* – where the concept "main verb", which picks out the word *is* in this case, is a concept that depends on the grammatical structure of the whole sentence. But (the claim is) no human language has *or could have* a rule that forms questions by moving the first verb of the statement, so that instead of asking *Is the man that you were talking about in the kitchen?* you would ask *Were the man that you talking about is in the kitchen?* From an abstract, computational point of view, identifying the first verb is a much simpler operation to define than identifying the main verb, so you might think it should be a commoner kind of rule to find among the languages of the world. But identifying the first verb in a sentence is an operation which is independent of the grammatical structure into which the individual words are grouped; so, instead of being a common type of rule, according to generative linguistics it never occurs at all.

Many people can accept this idea that there are universal constraints on the diversity of grammatical rules, as an interesting and possibly true finding of technical linguistic theory, without feeling that it threatens (or even relates in any way to) humanly-significant aspects of cultural diversity. Grammar in our languages is like plumbing in our houses: it needs to be there, but most people really are not interested in thinking about the details. The humanly significant

things that happen in houses are things that happen in the dining room, the drawing room, and undoubtedly in the bedrooms, but not in the pipes behind the walls. Many generative linguists undoubtedly see themselves as cultivating a subject that is as self-contained as plumbing is: they themselves are professionally interested in language structure and only in language structure.

But the leaders of the profession do not see things that way at all. For Pinker, and for Chomsky, language structure is interesting because it is seen as a specially clear kind of evidence about human cognition in a far broader sense. The fact that grammar is a rather exact field makes it relatively easy to formalize and test theories about grammatical universals. Other aspects of culture which may have greater human significance often have a somewhat woolly quality that makes it harder to pin them down mathematically or scientifically. But the value of generative linguistics, for the leaders of the field, lies in the light it sheds on these broader areas of cognition and culture.

So, for instance, Chomsky used linguistics to argue that the range of humanly-possible art forms is fixed by our biology: if a lot of modern art seems rubbishy and silly, that may be because we have already exhausted the biologically-available possibilities, leaving no way for contemporary artists to innovate other than by "Mockery of conventions that are, ultimately, grounded in human cognitive capacity" (Chomsky 1976: 125). And similarly, Chomsky felt, the general human enterprise of scientific discovery is limited to trying out a fixed range of theories which our biology makes available to us, and which can by no means be expected to include the truth about various topics – he said "Thinking of humans as biological organisms ... it is only a lucky accident if their cognitive capacity happens to be well matched to scientific truth in some area" (Chomsky 1976: 25).

Likewise, although the bulk of Pinker's book *The Language Instinct* is obviously about language, what it leads up to is a final chapter, "Mind Design", which uses what has gone before as the basis for a far more wide-ranging account of the fixity of human cognition and culture. Pinker refers at length to a book by the social anthropologist Donald Brown, *Human Universals* (Brown 1991), in order to argue that alongside Chomsky's "UG" or Universal Grammar we need to recognize a "UP", or Universal People – behind the apparent diversity of human cultures described by anthropologists lie hundreds of cultural universals, which Pinker specifies via a list of headings that stretches over several pages. In an important sense, human beings don't really have different cultures – in the picture Pinker presents, human beings share one culture, but with superficial local variations (just as, from Chomsky's point of view, we do not really speak different languages – for Chomsky it would be more accurate to say that we all speak essentially one language, though with superficial local differences – Chomsky 1991: 26). And having established his reputation with *The Language Instinct*, Pinker in his most important subsequent books, *How the Mind Works* (1997) and *The Blank Slate* (2002), moves well beyond language to develop in a much more general way this idea that human cognitive life is as biologically determined as human anatomy.[1]

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[1] We should add that Steven Pinker has by now produced a large body of writings which also include some very valuable contributions: for instance his analysis (Pinker 2011) of how violence in society has declined with the growth of civilization. For that matter we by no means disagree with everything that Pinker says in *The Blank Slate*. But what Pinker says about language and the human faculty of reason is, in our view, deeply mistaken.

Furthermore, it is clear that it is these broader implications which have allowed generative linguistics to make the impact it has achieved on the intellectual scene generally. We often hear findings that by this or that measure Noam Chomsky is the world's most influential living intellectual (see, for instance, an international survey published in October 2005 by the magazine *Prospect* – *Prospect* 2005). No-one could conceivably attain that status merely via analysis of grammatical structure, no matter how original. In Chomsky's case, of course, his status derives in large part from his interventions in concrete political affairs, which are arguably a rather separate matter from his theoretical positions. But Steven Pinker himself attained a very respectable 26th position in the same *Prospect* poll, and Pinker is not known for specific political activities. So far as the general public is concerned, the importance of generative linguistics is not to do with language.

15.5 Cognitive constraints and cultural universalism

Once one grants the idea that biology makes only a limited range of cultural possibilities available to us, it is a short step to saying that a unique set of optimal social arrangements can be identified which in principle are valid for all humans everywhere. We can't expect that primitive, economically-backward human groups will have found their way to that optimal ideal, because their circumstances are not conducive to exploring the alternatives that do exist. But the picture which Chomsky offers, when he discusses biological limits to the ranges of possible scientific theories or genres of art, is that once society grows rich enough to allow people to escape

> the social and material conditions that prevent free intellectual development ... Then, science, mathematics, and art would flourish, pressing on towards the limits of cognitive capacity (Chomsky 1976: 124–125)

– and he suggests that we in the West seem now to have reached those limits. Third World tribes might live in ways which fail fully to implement the universally ideal human culture, but we Westerners are in a position to be able to identify the right way for humans to live – the way that is right for ourselves, and right for Third World tribespeople too, though they don't know it yet.

Certainly, the idea that there is no unique optimal way of life, and that humans ought to be permanently free to experiment with novel cultural arrangements in the expection that societies will always discover new ways to progress, has historically been associated with the belief that the contents of human cognition are not given in advance. The founder of the liberal approach in politics, which holds that the State ought to limit its interference with individual subjects as narrowly as possible in order to leave them free to experiment, was John Locke; and, classically, Locke (1690: II, §1.6) argued that:

> He that attentively considers the state of a child, at his first coming into the world, will have little reason to think him stored with plenty of ideas, that are to be the matter of his future knowledge. It is by degrees he comes to be furnished with them.

Logically it makes sense for those who believe in biologically-fixed innate ideas to place a low value on the possibilities of cultural diversity and innovation.

The trouble is, in reality there are no biological constraints imposing specific, detailed structure on human cognitive life. And someone who believes in cognitive universals, in a situation where none exist, is almost bound to end up mistaking the accidental features of his own culture, or of the dominant culture in his world, for cultural universals.

15.6 "Universal grammar" means European grammar

In the case of linguistics this mistake is very clear. From the early years of generative grammar onwards, sceptics repeatedly objected that generative linguists were merely formalizing structural features of English, or features shared by most Indo-European languages, and assuming that they had identified universals of language structure. Generative linguists often denied this, and argued that the initial over-emphasis on English was just a temporary consequence of the theory having been born in an English-speaking country. But, even though by now a far wider range of languages are regularly discussed in the generative literature, the sceptics' charge remains true. Exotic languages are observed through English-speaking spectacles.

Sometimes this emerges from the very terminology of the field. Consider how generative linguists discuss the incidence of subject pronouns. In North-West European languages, such as English, German, and French, it is roughly true that every finite verb has an explicit subject – even when the identity of the subject would be obvious from the context alone, a pronoun has to appear. But we don't need to go beyond the Indo-European language family to find languages where that is not so: in (Classical or Modern) Greek, for instance, the verb inflexion shows the person and number of the subject, and it is fairly unusual to include a subject pronoun as well. Generative linguists call languages like Greek "Pro-Drop" languages (see e.g. Rizzi 1982, Neeleman and Szendrői 2007). The implication of "Pro-Drop" is transparent: in "Universal Grammar" (or in other words, in English) verbs have subject pronouns, so a language like Greek which often lacks them must be a language in which the pronouns that are universally present at an underlying level are "dropped" at the surface.

In the case of Greek and other European "Pro-Drop" languages, this Anglocentric view of the situation is at least consistent, in the sense that normally these languages do contain features showing what the subject pronoun would be, if it were present. But if we go beyond Europe, we find languages where even that is not true. In Classical Chinese, verbs commonly lack subjects; and there is no question of inferring the identity of missing subjects from verb inflexions, because Chinese is not an inflecting language. A European who hears this might guess that the difference between Classical Chinese and European languages is that our languages use formal features to identify subjects explicitly, while Chinese identifies them implicitly by mentioning situational features from which verb subjects can be inferred. But that is not true either: as we saw in chapter 1, often in Classical Chinese the subject of a verb *cannot* be inferred. A standard puzzle for Europeans who encounter Classical Chinese poetry is ambiguity about whether a poet is describing events in his own life, or actions of some third party. Because our own languages are the way they are, we feel that there must be an answer to this question; when a Chinese poet writes a verb, let's say the word for "see", surely in

his own mind he must either have been thinking "I see" or thinking "he sees"? But that just forces our own categories of thought onto a language where they do not apply. To the Chinese themselves, asking whether the poet meant "I see" or "he sees" is asking a non-question. In English we can say "He saw her" without specifying whether he was wearing glasses or saw her with his naked eye. In Classical Chinese one could, and often did, say "Saw her" without specifying "I saw" or "he saw".

How can the implications of the term "Pro-Drop" be appropriate, if there are languages whose speakers not only frequently do not use pronouns but frequently do not even have corresponding concepts in their mind?

Pro-Drop is only one example of the way that generative linguistics mistakes features that happen to apply to the well-known languages spoken in our particular time and part of the world for features that are imposed on all human languages by human biology. But the point is far more general.

Consider David Gil's account of Riau Indonesian (e.g. Gil 2001), which we examined in chapter 1. When native speakers of this dialect are talking casually and naturally, their grammar has features that make it difficult to map on to the alleged structural universals discussed by generative linguistics. But when the speakers are challenged to think consciously about their language, for instance by translating from English into Indonesian, they switch to a formal version of Indonesian which looks much more like the kind of language which textbooks of theoretical linguistics discuss. One might imagine that this formal Indonesian reflects speakers' true underlying linguistic competence, while the colloquial dialect is a kind of reduced, distorted language-variety relevant only to studies of performance. But according to Gil it is the other way round. The colloquial language-variety represents the speakers' real linguistic heritage. Formal Indonesian is a more or less artificial construct, created in response to the impact of Western culture, and containing features designed to mirror the logical structure of European languages. So, naturally, formal Indonesian looks relatively "normal" to Western linguists, but it is no real evidence in favour of universals of grammar – whereas colloquial Riau dialect is good evidence *against* linguistic universals. Speakers use the formal variety when thinking consciously about their language, because politically it is the high-prestige variety; but it is not their most natural language.

Analogous situations occur with many Third World languages, Consequently, generative linguists tend systematically to study artificial languages created under Western cultural influence under the mistaken impression that they are finding evidence that alien cultures are much the same as ours.

15.7 Honest and dishonest imperialism

What generative linguistics is doing here is describing the diverse languages of the world as if they were all variations on a pattern defined by the dominant language or language-group – but at the same time pretending that this does not amount to Anglocentrism or Eurocentrism, because the fixed common pattern is defined not by a particular language or language-family, but by a hypothetical innate cognitive structure shared by all human beings. In a similar way, 21st-century internationalists are doing at least as much as 18th- and 19th-century imperialists did to impose their particular preferred cultural norms on people to whom those norms are alien; but the modern internationalists pretend that this does not count

as cultural imperialism, because the favoured norms are presented not as arbitrary preferences, but as principles allegedly valid for all peoples at all times (even though many of them were thought up only quite recently).

The empire-builders of the nineteenth century did not think or speak in those terms. They were well aware that different peoples had genuinely different and sometimes incompatible cultural norms, and that there were real conflicts to be resolved between the principle that indigenous cultures should be respected, and the principle that government should guarantee to alien subjects the same rights that it guaranteed to members of the governing nation. A well-known example is suttee (nowadays sometimes spelled *sati*), the Hindu practice of burning a dead man's widow on his funeral pyre. When the British took control of India, they tried to avoid interfering with most native customs, but as an exception they banned suttee. On one famous occasion a group of male Hindus protested about this to Sir Charles James Napier (1782–1853), who is reported to have replied:

> You say that it is your custom to burn widows. Very well. We also have a custom: when men burn a woman alive, we tie a rope around their necks and we hang them. Build your funeral pyre; beside it, my carpenters will build a gallows. You may follow your custom. And then we will follow ours.

Notice that there was no suggestion here of suttee violating some universal code of human rights, which the Hindus could in principle have known about before the British arrived. It wasn't that at all: Napier saw Hindu and British moral universes as incommensurable. Within the Hindu moral universe, burning widows was the right thing to do. Within the British moral universe, burning anyone alive was a wrong thing to do. The British had acquired power over the Hindus, so now the Hindus were going to be forced to play by British rules whether they agreed with them or not.

We can reasonably debate and disagree about where the right balance lies between respecting alien cultures, and seeking to modify those cultures when they involve systematic oppression or cruelty. But the bare minimum we owe to other cultures, surely, is at least to acknowledge that they are indeed different. If powerful outsiders tell us that aspects of the culture we grew up in are unacceptable to them, so they are going to change these whether we like it or not, then we shall probably resent that and try to resist. But we should be humiliated far worse, if the outsiders tell us and our fellows that we had not got a genuinely separate culture in the first place – the patterns they are imposing on us are the universal cultural patterns appropriate to all human beings, and if our traditional way of life deviated in some respects that was just because we were a bit muddled and ignorant. That is the attitude which present-day internationalism implies and generative linguistics supports.

Of course, there is no doubt that Noam Chomsky in particular would indignantly deny that. He is frequently eloquent in denouncing imperialism. But his comments on specific political issues, and the logical consequences of his abstract theorizing, are two very different things. What is really poisonous about the ideology that emerges from generative linguistics is that it creates a rationale for powerful groups to transform the ways of life of powerless groups while pretending that they are imposing no real changes – they are merely freeing the affected groups to realize the same innate cultural possibilities which are as natural

to them as they are to everyone else, because we human beings all inherit the same biologically-fixed cultural foundations.

As Larissa Macfarquhar (2003) put it in a *New Yorker* profile of Chomsky:

> Chomsky ... has never been attracted to the notion that psychological originality or cultural variety is essential to what it means to be human. Politically, though, this has always been a dangerous move (the Jacobin move), for it allows the theorist not to take seriously any argument that departs from rationality as the theorist defines it. There can be no disagreement, then, only truth and error ...

15.8 Vocabulary and culture

It seems obvious that the institutions a society evolves for itself, and the kinds of fulfilment its members seek, will have a great deal to do with the structure of concepts encoded in its language. Consider for instance the central role of the concept of "freedom" or "liberty" in European life. The history of European political thought, from the classical Greeks to today, has been very largely about how best to interpret the ideal of freedom and how to maximize the incidence of freedom. When Europeans assess the quality of their individual lives, they tend to do so in significant part by assessing how much freedom they enjoy. Europeans were able to assign this central role to the concept of freedom, because they spoke languages which encoded the concept from a very early period. Latin *liber*, and Greek *eleutheros*, both derive from the same Indo-European root, which originally meant "people" (as the German cognate *Leute* does today). The semantic transition from "belonging to the people" to "free" originally came about because those born into an ethnic group were free men while those brought in as captives from elsewhere were slaves; the fact that this same semantic transition shows up in both the Italic and the Greek branches implies that the "freedom" concept dates back before the historical period most of the way to Proto-Indo-European.[2] Because the concept of "freedom" corresponded to a common word familiar to any speaker, no doubt originally in a relatively down-to-earth, unsophisticated sense, it was available for thinkers from Greeks in the Classical world through to Dante, Locke, and many others in recent centuries to invest with the much greater weight of significance and emotional importance that we associate with it today.

We can see how culturally conditioned this development was, if we compare Europe with China. Chinese civilization is older than ours, and for most of the last 3000 years, until the Industrial Revolution, any neutral observer would have had to judge Chinese civilization as more complex and sophisticated than that of Europe. But, as it happens, the large battery of concepts which the Chinese language made available to its speakers included no root at all comparable to our word *free*. When Chinese intellectuals began to examine and translate Western thought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they had to adapt a compound term used

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[2] English *free* and German *frei*, together with Welsh *rhydd*, represent a similar semantic transition in a different Indo-European root, and again the fact that the transition is reflected both in Germanic and in Celtic suggests that the "freedom" sense is old – though in this case there is apparently an argument that one subfamily may have borrowed it from the other after Germanic and Celtic had separated.

in a distantly-related sense, *zì yóu* 自 由, to stand for the European concept (see Huang 1972: 69);[3] and we understand that Chinese readers had difficulty in grasping that Europeans saw this idea as positive – for the Chinese a good society was one in which individuals subordinated themselves to the collectivity. Philosophy in traditional China was predominantly political philosophy, but Chinese political thought was not concerned with individual freedom, and individual Chinese who assessed the quality of their lives did not use that measure.[4] Arguably, this contrast remains highly relevant for understanding the differences between China and the West today.

This interdependence between vocabulary and social institutions seems a familiar, uncontroversial idea. But generative linguistics has no room for it. The generative view of vocabulary is explained in Pinker's *Language Instinct* by reference to Jerry Fodor's theory of a language of thought. As we have seen, Fodor holds that we understand utterances in an ordinary spoken language by translating them into an internal language of thought which is fixed by human genetics; and because the language of thought is inherited biologically rather than evolved culturally, it is universal. The languages of different societies do not truly differ in their vocabularies: they all encode the same innate set of concepts. If European languages all have a word for "free" and Chinese traditionally had no such word, Fodor might explain that by saying that the European languages happen to use a single word for a compound of universal concepts which traditional Chinese would have needed to spell out via a paraphrase – rather as German has a single word *Geschwister* for a concept which English has to spell out as a three-word phrase, "brothers and sisters".

Here we are putting words into Fodor's mouth: Fodor does not actually discuss specific cases of vocabulary difference, which is perhaps quite wise of him. Pinker does, though. Indeed, he gives the specific example of "freedom" as an instance of a concept which all human beings possess, whether or not it is encoded in their language (Pinker 1995: 82). But if one insists that members of a major world civilization, which over millennia neither used a word for a particular concept nor adopted institutions which reflected that concept, nevertheless had the concept in

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[3] The original meaning of *zì yóu* was something like "follow[ing] one's own bent", with no political connotation. Interestingly, when the standard (pre-Communist) Chinese dictionary-encyclopaedia *Cí Hǎi* offers a definition for the modern, political sense of *zì yóu* (Shu et al. 1938: section *wei*, p. 221), from a Western point of view it rather misses the point by saying "not subject to *unlawful* constraint" (our translation, and our italics) – but law is a main source of potential threats to freedom.

[4] The sole reference we find in Fung Yu-lan's standard *Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (Fung 1948) to a term corresponding to "free, freedom" in Chinese thought before the onset of Western influence is a single passage in the 3rd–4th-century Xiang–Guo commentary on chapter 1 of the *Zhuang-zi* (Fung, p. 229), which at several points uses *xiāo-yáo* 逍 遙 or just *yáo* (Karlgren 1957: entries 1149m, 1144k) in a sense translated by Fung as "happiness and freedom" or just "freedom". (In the edition of the *Zhuang-zi* on our shelves, some of these instances of *yáo* appear instead as the visually-similar and much commoner word *tōng* 通, Karlgren entry 1185r, which means something entirely different; Fung evidently, and doubtless correctly, takes *tōng* to be a scribal error for *yáo*.) The basic meaning of (*xiāo*)-*yáo* was "to saunter about, be at ease", and in Fung's interpretation of the Xiang–Guo passage it refers there to freedom in a psychological sense: the nirvana-like state of mind of one who has relinquished all desires. Even if we accept Fung's interpretation of this isolated passage, the usage there is a far cry from freedom in the political sense. Note by contrast how implausible it is that a history of European philosophy would fail to include abundant references to free will and political freedom.

their minds, then surely we have left science behind and entered the realm of quasi-religious dogma.

If Fodor and Pinker are right, vocabulary differences would be superficial things. They would not amount to reasons for societies to equip themselves with significantly different institutions, or for their members to pursue significantly different goals.

(Incidentally, even if we did accept Fodor's and Pinker's idea that vocabulary is innate, it would not follow that it is universal. It might seem more plausible that vocabulary should vary with individuals' ancestry. Chinese might not only lack some concepts that European languages contain, and vice versa, but yellow men, or black men, would be unable to learn some white words even when exposed to them, and white men would be unable to learn some yellow words or black words. After all, it is clear that the human brain did not cease to evolve biologically after the time when our species began to diverge into distinct races, and indeed we know now that it has continued to evolve in recent times (Evans et al. 2005, Mekel-Bobrov et al. 2005); so why would the brain modules responsible for the language of thought be exempt from biological evolution? We have seen no hint of this concept of racially-bound vocabulary in the writings of generative linguists, but the most plausible reason for that is merely that they fear the consequences of taking their ideas to this logical conclusion. The generative linguists want to be influential; they want to dominate their corner of the academic map, so that the research grants and attractive jobs keep coming. You do not achieve that by raising the possibility that coloured people might be genetically incapable of fully understanding English.)

15.9 Universalist politics

If all human minds shared the same biologically-fixed stock of concepts, then it might make sense to say that there is one system of social ideals which can be deduced by studying our innate cognitive mechanisms, and which is valid for all human beings everywhere and at all times, whether they realize it or not. Increasingly, we find that politics these days is operated as if that idea were true. (Cf. Phillips 2006: 63–78.)

For instance, in 2005 we in the European Union narrowly avoided adopting a Constitution whose text laid down a mass of detailed rules covering aspects of life (for instance, labour relations, housing policy, the treatment of the disabled, etc.), which traditionally would have found no place in a constitution. A normal State constitution confines itself to specifying basic rules about how the organs of the State interrelate, what the limits of their respective powers are, how their members are chosen and dismissed, and so forth. Detailed rules about relationships between private employers and employees, say, would evolve over time through the continuing argy-bargy of political activity within the unchanging framework of the basic law. But, if human culture is built on the basis of a limited range of concepts that are biologically fixed and common to all human beings, then perhaps it should be possible to work out an ideal set of rules for society in much more detail, in the expectation that they will remain ideal in the 22nd and 23rd centuries – after all, human biology is not likely to change much over a few hundred years.

We escaped the European constitution, thanks to the voters of France and the Netherlands – though the mighty ones of the European project seem still to believe that the constitution was a good idea, and have been quietly attempting to revive it. But there are plenty of other examples where laws are being changed in

the name of hypothetical universal principles, although the laws in question have worked unproblematically for long periods and the populations affected have no desire for change.

Thus, consider what has been done over the last few years to the island of Sark, which is a constitutionally-separate dependency of the British Crown a few miles off the northern coast of France. Sark is one of the world's smallest States, with a population of about 600, and politically it was until very recently a remarkable feudal survival, with a constitution that must have been on the old-fashioned side even when the island was settled in the 16th century. In 2004 Sark was forced by European Union pressure to remove the provisions in its laws which prescribed the death penalty for treason, although the Serquois population protested loudly that they believed treason should remain punishable by death. And later a couple of rich newcomers found that the laws of Sark did not suit them, so in 2008 they used the European Convention on Human Rights to get the constitution overturned and transformed into a standard modern democratic system.

Until a few decades ago, we in Britain had the death penalty for more crimes than just treason, and debate continues about whether we were wise to give it up. The USA retains the death penalty today. Surely it is obvious that this is the kind of issue on which we can expect different cultures to differ, not one that can be settled in terms of hypothetical universal principles? It is understandable that the Serquois take a more serious view of treason than the English do: they had the experience within living memory of being invaded and occupied by enemy forces, something which England has happily been spared for almost a thousand years. Of course, if one believes in detailed universal principles underlying human culture, then local accidents of history may be neither here nor there. But, for those of us who disbelieve in a detailed biologically-fixed substratum for culture, it is expected that differences of historical experience of this kind will lead to differences in present-day cultural frameworks, and it is right and proper that they should be allowed to do so.

As for the constitution: the fact that the Serquois would prefer to keep it does not matter. The fact that in a face-to-face society of 600 men, women, and children there are better ways available to individuals to register their opinions than marking a cross on a slip of paper once every few years doesn't matter. The culture of Sark is being changed over the heads of the Serquois; but instead of being presented as a case of two powerful people selfishly forcing 600 powerless people to change their ways, which is the truth of it, we are asked to see it as a case of the Serquois finally achieving rights which have been unjustly witheld from them for centuries.

We could give other examples from more distant areas of the world which are more serious (though perhaps not quite as absurd) as the defeudalization of Sark.[5] The general point is that we are moving at present from a world in which

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[5] Consider for instance the way in which Britain has recently been eliminating the residual dependence of ex-colonial West Indian jurisdictions on the English legal system, and setting them up with fully-independent legal frameworks of their own, but in doing so has been careful to provide the newly-independent legal systems with entrenched rules against outlawing homosexual activity. It is clear that cultures are very diverse in their attitudes to homosexuality, which was a serious criminal offence in Britain itself not many decades ago. Europeans have changed their views on this, but many African-descended cultures seem to have a specially strong horror of homosexuality. If we are serious about giving other peoples their independence, we have to accept that their cultures will

everyone recognizes that cultures are different, though powerful cultures sometimes impose their will on weaker ones and modify them, to a world where that still happens but the powerful nations or groups pretend that the basic principles of culture are everywhere alike, so that if they interfere with alien cultures they are not essentially changing them – merely allowing them to be what they were trying to be anyway, although in some cases they didn't realize it.

Politicians do not often state their assumptions at this level of philosophical abstraction; but a recent British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, made explicit remarks on the topic, in a valedictory essay on the lessons of his ten years as premier. Justifying his foreign policy, he wrote (Blair 2007):

> There is nothing more ridiculous than the attempt to portray "democracy" or "freedom" as somehow "Western" concepts which, mistakenly, we try to apply to nations or peoples to whom they are alien. There may well be governments to whom they are alien. But not peoples. ... These values are universal.

The ex-Prime Minister was in error. The concepts of democracy and freedom are specific cultural creations, in the same way that the game of chess or the Apple Macintosh operating system are. They may be excellent ideas, but they are not "universal" ideas. If the political leaders of the English-speaking world are taking it for granted now that only tyrannical governments stand in the way of culturally-remote populations realizing essentially the same structure of political ideals as ours, because that structure is innate in everyone, this may explain a great deal about recent overseas interventions and their unhappy outcomes.[6]

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embody some different choices from ours on issues like this. But instead, the new internationalists announce that alien nations are required to conform culturally to a set of principles which are alleged to be universally valid – and which, just by coincidence, happen to match the principles embraced at the moment by the world's most powerful nations. Setting people free, but requiring them to use their freedom in approved ways, is not setting them free.

[6] [Added by GRS after print publication:] It turns out that Tony Blair is not the only Western politician who assumes that non-Western societies "must" share our concept of liberty as an ideal. Blair offers no evidence, he is one of those idiots like Noam Chomsky who assumes that whatever he wakes up thinking in the morning must make sense and be correct just because it is his thought. Much more interestingly, Chris Patten (1998) has argued the same point of view using quotations from the Chinese classics, in a book about errors made by Western governments in dealing with modern China, based on his experiences as last British governor of Hong Kong. Patten's comments about relations between the West and China are wise. But, on liberty, Patten misrepresents his sources. (He says he cannot read Chinese, so the blame doubtless rests partly with the translations he used.) The most telling case comes when he quotes Confucius's *Analects*, 9.25, as "One may rob an army of its commander-in-chief; one cannot deprive the humblest man of his free will." (Patten cites the passage as "9.26", but in my copy the number is 25.) The original contains nothing corresponding to "free" in this English version! The clause in question runs 匹夫不可奪志也. The word 志 means simply "purpose", "will"; the Communist form of address, "comrade", is in Chinese 同志, "same purpose". Confucius was making the reasonable point that while it is quite possible to remove the agent who directs the actions of an army, it is not possible to remove the part of an individual which directs and co-ordinates his bodily actions. To describe that directing process as "free", even supposing Confucius had had vocabulary to do so, would not have helped his comparison: in Confucius's time as in ours a general did not normally choose for himself what end to achieve by military means, only how to go about achieving it.

I entirely agree with Chris Patten about the value of liberty as an ideal. But that does not mean that everyone has always understood it; they have not. The Chinese discovered many good

(We have dealt with the non-universality of the freedom concept in the previous section. In the case of democracy, one might have thought that a general awareness of European intellectual history would have been enough to show how culture-specific the concept is. Or consider the debates which have occurred in China since the promulgation of "Charter 08" which called for that country to "join ... the mainstream of civilisation" by "recognising universal values" (*Economist* 2010, 2011). Whether or not a value such as democratic election of governments deserves to become universal, the debates have only made sense because as a matter of fact this and various other Western ideals did not play a part in Chinese thinking over the vast majority of China's three-thousand-year history.)

There is a clear parallel between this new imperialism of universal rights, and the generative-linguistics concept of universal cognitive structure. Obviously, we do not suggest that the sort of people who decide to impose adult suffrage on the island of Sark are doing so because they have been reading Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* and got a bit over-excited. Probably they have never heard of Noam Chomsky or Steven Pinker. But the link is that intellectuals such as Chomsky and Pinker are creating a philosophical climate within which the new imperialism of the 21st century becomes justifiable.

Without that philosophical climate, the new imperialism is just a product of ignorance – because people these days learn so little about cultures that are distant from our own, they genuinely fail to appreciate that human cultures can be extremely different, and consequently when they spot something somewhere far away from Western metropolises which looks out of line, they take it to indicate a pathological deviation that needs to be normalized. That attitude could be cured by better education. But if most of the principles of human culture are determined by the shared genetic inheritance of our species, then where there are cultural differences it becomes reasonable to infer that one of the cultures really is pathological in the relevant respect. And, since it is difficult for any member of an established, successful culture to believe that his own familiar way of life is diseased, the alien culture is assumed to need curing – for its own good.

15.10 Abandoning the touchstone of empiricism

The ideology which is emerging from generative linguistics does not only involve new and surprising ideas about the biological determination of cognition. It also embodies new and surprising ideas about how we decide what is true.

If a set of popular ideas are factually mistaken, traditionally we expect that sooner or later they will be abandoned because people see that the evidence refutes them. In the case of generative linguistics, though, this routine safety-mechanism of scientific advance is not working, because, as we have seen, one component of the generative approach is an explicit claim that empirical evidence is not relevant. Since linguistics is about things happening in speakers' minds, the generativists argue, if you want to find out how the grammar of your language works what you should do is look into your mind – consult your intuitions as a speaker, rather than listening to how other people speak in practice. How people actually speak is linguistic "performance", which the generativists see as an imperfect, distorted reflection of the true linguistic "competence" within speakers' minds. Besides, a

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things which we learned about from them, but freedom was something we happened to learn about first, and East Asians learned about it from us.

linguist's intuition gives him access to information about the precise construction he happens to be interested in at the time – even if this is in fact a good grammatical construction, one might have to listen out for a very long time before one was lucky enough to hear a speaker use it in real life.

We have been here before. In the Middle Ages, people used intuition to decide all sorts of scientific questions: for instance, they knew that the planets moved in circular orbits, because the circle is the only shape perfect enough to suit a celestial object – and when empirical counter-evidence began coming in, they piled epicycles on epicycles in order to reconcile their intuitive certainty about circles with the awkward observations. Since Galileo, most of us have understood that intuitive evidence is no use: it misleads you. The planets in reality travel in ellipses. And even though language is an aspect of our own behaviour rather than a distant external reality, intuitive evidence is no more reliable in linguistics than it is in astronomy. As we saw in chapter 13, some of the mistakes that generative linguists have made by relying on intuitive evidence have been breathtakingly large.

15.11 Intuition-based politics

Parallel errors are occurring in current affairs. Again and again in the contemporary world we find political decisions which crucially affect people's ways of life being made on a basis of intuition, when empirical evidence is available but is ignored.

A good example is foreign aid. To many people in the present-day West it ranks as an unquestionable axiom that the best way to help African and other Third-World societies out of grinding poverty is to step up the level of aid payments which our governments hand over to their governments.

In reality, there has been abundant argument based on hard evidence, from economists like the late Lord (Peter) Bauer in England and William Easterly in the USA, that foreign aid doesn't work. (See e.g. Bauer 1981, Easterly 2006.) It is a good way of politicizing recipient societies and diverting the efforts of their populations away from developing successful independent and productive ways of life towards striving to become unproductive government clients; and it is a good way of turning Third World governments in turn into clients of Western governments, so that the direct control of the age of empires is replaced by a looser, less overt form of imperialism. But as a method of making the average African less poor: forget it.

We know what would genuinely improve the lot of the average African: free trade, which would allow individual Africans to build up businesses producing the agricultural goods which their economies are ready to produce, and selling them to Western markets free of tariff barriers such as the scandalous European Common Agricultural Policy, which at present actively prevents Third World residents from making a living in the only ways that are realistically open to many of them. Free trade is not enough – poor countries also need decent government – but it is a necessary condition. Free trade would permit the growth of genuinely independent societies in the Third World, shaped through the inhabitants' own initiatives and choices.

But that is probably not going to happen, because we in the West intuitively know that foreign aid is the answer. It hasn't achieved much over the last fifty years, and the economic logic suggests that it never could – but who cares about empirical evidence and argument, when the thought of our tax money going in

foreign aid gives us a warm, virtuous glow inside ourselves, and that is what counts? Commercial trading relationships feel intuitively like a cold-hearted area of life, not something that we ought to be imposing on people as poor and powerless as the residents of sub-Saharan Africa. The Doha Round of international trade negotiations, launched in 2001, was intended principally to give Third World countries freer access for exports to the EU and the USA; but within a few years it had well-nigh collapsed with little achieved, and how many in the West even noticed? Not many. In 2012 *The Economist* argued that it was unreasonable to allow failure to agree freer trade in agriculture, "an industry that makes up only 7% of world trade", to interfere with progress towards freer trade between industrial nations – to which representatives of a number of Third World countries very reasonably responded that this amounted to saying "that poorer countries must abandon their agenda because richer economies are not willing to make the very same tough political decisions they ask of the developing world", and pointed out that agriculture accounted for more than sixty per cent of exports from some developing countries (*Economist* 2012).

Foreign aid is one area where public policy is nowadays based on intuition rather than on empirical evidence, to an extent that we believe would not have happened fifty or a hundred years ago. Let us give one more, smaller-scale example: the recent fate of foxhunting in England.

For hundreds of years, riding horses to follow dogs hunting foxes has been a central component of the culture of various rural parts of England. Not only does it provide glorious exercise for all ages and both sexes in winter, when other outdoor possibilities are few, but the organizations created to manage local hunts have also been the focus of much other social activity in remote areas; the dances where the girls have the best opportunity to dress up and show themselves off are typically the Hunt Balls. In 2004, in the face of passionate objections by members of hunting communities, foxhunting was made illegal, with no compensation for the thousands of hunt servants and others whose livelihoods were abolished at a stroke, by Members of Parliament most of whom are town-dwellers and scarcely know one end of a horse from the other. The true motive for this legislation was that hunting is associated with features of rural society that the then governing party instinctively dislikes – a local Master of Fox Hounds will often (though by no means always) be an aristocrat living in a large old house. But that sort of thing could not be openly stated as a reason for legal interference with people's longstanding way of life, so instead it was argued that hunting is unnecessarily cruel. This is a testable claim. Foxes in a farming area are pests whose numbers have to be controlled somehow, and it is an open question whether hunting with hounds is a specially cruel way to do it. The Government set up an enquiry under Lord Burns to answer the question; rather to Government's surprise, perhaps, the Burns Report published in 2000 found that banning foxhunting would have no clear positive effect on the incidence of cruelty (it might even increase cruelty), and it would have other consequences which everyone agrees to be adverse.[7]

So the empirical evidence was there: how much influence did it have on the parliamentary process which led to the ban? None at all. The people who made the decisions were not interested in empirical evidence. Foxes look like sweet, cuddly,

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[7] See <www.huntinginquiry.gov.uk/>. In July 2006 a survey on the practical effects of the Hunting Act appeared to show that its consequences for fox welfare have indeed been negative, with many foxes now wounded by shotguns rather than cleanly killed (Clover 2006).

furry creatures, and parliamentarians intuitively knew that hunting them was wrong. Many country folk had the opposite intuition, but how seriously could one take them? Faced with a choice between a peasant type in cheap clothes and a rural accent, versus a well-spoken Member of Parliament in an expensive dark suit, it is obvious which one has authoritative intuitions and which one has mere personal opinions.[8]

Likewise, if we in the West with our comfortable houses and air-conditioned cars know intuitively that foreign aid is the way to rescue Africans from poverty, isn't it clear to everyone that our intuitions are more authoritative than those of some African living in a thatched hut and wearing a grubby singlet, who might prefer the chance to find wider markets for his cash crops?

Well, to the present authors it isn't clear. But then we are among those eccentrics who still believe in empirical evidence.

We have offered two examples of the way in which decisions that crucially impact on people's ways of life are these days being made in terms of intuition and arguments from authority, rather than in terms of hard, reliable evidence. Obviously we are not suggesting that this is happening because of generative linguistics. Most people who are influential in decisions about foreign aid, foxhunting, or many other current-affairs issues that we could have used as illustrations, will be people who have never given a thought to generative linguistics or to the picture of human cognition which is derived from it. But what that theory does is to provide an intellectual rationale for these political developments. While people in political life were moving purely as a matter of fashion away from reliance on empirical evidence toward reliance on intution and argument from authority, one could point out how irrational this fashion is. Even those who were caught up in the tide of fashion, if they understood what they were doing, might with luck be persuaded to turn back to the firm ground of empirical evidence; they would have found no explicit arguments to justify the fashionable trend. What generative linguistics has been doing is supplying those missing arguments. It has begun to create a climate of intellectual opinion that makes it possible for people openly to say in so many words, "Yes, we are basing decisions on intuition rather than on evidence, and we are right to do so. Empirical argument is outdated 20th-century thinking – we are progressing beyond that."

Incidentally, we also appreciate that many readers will find examples like foxhunting, or the governance of a tiny island with a three-figure population, unimportant and almost frivolous relative to the profundity of the abstract political principles under discussion. That mismatch is entirely intentional. When political principles are discussed and illustrated by reference to major policy issues crucially affecting the welfare of tens of millions, it is very natural and often happens that the passions which readers have understandably invested in the concrete issues make it difficult for them to think coolly about the abstract underlying principles. We hope that by discussing the topic of this chapter largely in terms of minor,

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[8] To be fair to him, Tony Blair, who as Prime Minister pushed the hunting ban through, saw it a few years later as "a fatal mistake":

> I started to realise that this wasn't a small clique of weirdo inbreds delighting in cruelty, but a tradition, deeply embedded by history and profound community and social liens, that was integral to a way of life (Blair 2010: 304–306)

If Blair did not appreciate this before, it was not for want of people trying to explain it.

remote issues, it will be easier for readers to recognize that (irrespective of the rights or wrongs of the Sark way of life, or of foxhunting) it is vitally important to acknowledge that cultures can be deeply different, and that knowledge must be tested empirically.

Moving from reliance on empirical science to reliance on intuition and arguments from authority is not progress. It is a reversion to the pre-Enlightenment Middle Ages. That is why it is so important to explode the false claims of generative linguistics.

15.12 New evidence for language diversity

Happily, if we treat generative linguistics as a scientific theory rather than a matter of blind faith, then it is easily exploded. We have said that we have no space here to rehearse all the detailed arguments of Sampson (2005). But some of the most recent findings by non-generative linguists are so destructive for generative theory that the older and more technical debates become almost beside the point.

Until recently, the consensus among linguists of all theoretical persuasions was that known human languages seem to be roughly comparable in the expressive power of their grammars. Languages can differ in the nature of the verbal constructions they use in order to express some logical relationship, but we did not find fundamental logical structures that certain extant languages were just incapable of expressing. And that is crucial for the generative theory of human cognition. If our cognitive structures are biologically fixed, then all our languages should be equally capable of clothing those structures in words. A sceptic might respond that there is another possible explanation: all the languages we know about have emerged from a very long prehistoric period of cultural evolution, so there has been ample time for them to develop all the constructions they might need – simpler, structurally more primitive languages must once have existed, but that would have been long before the invention of writing. Still, the generative camp might have seen this as a rather weak answer.

It began to look a lot stronger, with the publication in 2000 of Guy Deutscher's *Syntactic Change in Akkadian* (Deutscher 2000). Akkadian was one of the earliest written languages in the world; as we saw in 10.13 above, Deutscher shows that we can see it developing in the Old Babylonian period (ca 2000–1500 BC), under the pressure of new communicative needs, from a state in which it contained no subordinate complement clauses into a later state where that construction had come into being. If the general grammatical architecture of human languages were determined by human biology, it is hard to see how a logical resource as fundamental as the complement clause could possibly be a historical development. It ought to be one of the universal features common to all human languages at all periods.

And the idea that all human languages are equally complex seemed to fall to pieces as soon as it was treated as a fallible hypothesis open to serious examination. See e.g. various papers in Miestamo et al. (2008) or Sampson, Gil, and Trudgill (2009).

In face of findings like these, it seems indisputable that early-20th-century scholars such as Franz Boas or H.A. Gleason were right about language diversity, and scholars like Pinker and Chomsky are just mistaken.

15.13 Conclusion

The truth is that languages are cultural developments, which human groups create freely, unconstrained except in trivial ways by their biology, just as they create games, or dances, or legal systems. The game of cricket is not encoded in an Englishman's genes – and nor is the English language. Linguistics gives us no serious grounds for believing in a model of human cognition according to which we are limited culturally to realizing one or other of a fixed range of possibilities. We are free to invent new cultural forms in the future, just as we have so abundantly done in the past.

We owe it to ourselves, to our descendants, and perhaps above all to our Third World neighbours to reject any ideology that claims to set boundaries to this process of ever-new blossoming of the human spirit. Just as our lives have risen above the limitations which constrained our ancestors, so we must leave those who come after us free to rise above the limitations which restrict us.

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