

A POSTMODERN CRITIQUE OF LINGUISTICS¹

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1. Introduction

Theoretical linguists are not the only people who are interested in language. Many others have such an interest: applied linguists, philosophers, psychologists, literary theorists, and others. Such people often have major reservations about what theoretical linguists say about language. More often than not these reservations stem from misunderstandings of one kind or another. It is clearly not necessary for theoretical linguists to respond to everything that outsiders say about them. Sometimes, however, it is appropriate to address the criticisms of an outsider. In this note, I will look at some criticisms of theoretical linguistics that are advanced by David Graddol, an applied linguist at the Open University. I am particularly concerned with the views advanced in Graddol (1993a), but I will also make some reference to ideas expressed in Graddol, Cheshire and Swann (1994).

Graddol (1993a) presents a critique of mainstream theoretical linguistics and of mainstream sociolinguistics, and argues for an alternative 'postmodern' view of linguistics. I will be particularly concerned with his critique of mainstream theoretical linguistics, but I will also comment briefly on his alternative postmodern conception of linguistics. I will argue that his critique is quite unconvincing. He often criticizes positions which are not generally assumed within mainstream work, and where he focusses on positions which are assumed in mainstream linguistics he provides no serious objections to them. I will take Chomsky here to be representative of mainstream linguistics. Many mainstream linguists reject many aspects of Chomsky's ideas. However, on the issues that I am concerned with here his views are generally accepted. Turning to Graddol's alternative postmodern conception of linguistics, I will argue that what he appears to be advocating is certain kinds of sociological research. These may well be a worthwhile kind of work but they are not an alternative to mainstream linguistics.

2. Language as an autonomous mechanism

For Graddol, mainstream linguistics is one manifestation of what he calls structuralism, which includes most work on language and most 20th century linguistics including mainstream theoretical linguistics. For structuralism, language is 'some kind of autonomous mechanism' (1993a: 1) and 'an autonomous mechanism whose structure can be described and analyzed independently of the social contexts of its use' (1993a: 7). Graddol is right to think that mainstream theoretical linguistics is committed to this assumption. For Chomsky, the main focus is on I-language, the speaker's mental grammar.² This interacts with other cognitive systems in linguistic performance, which

means primarily the production or the interpretation of speech and writing. Speech and writing and interpretations of speech and writing can be seen as the products of linguistic performance.

What Graddol thinks is wrong with this picture is unclear. The only argument that I could find is set out in the following remarks:

In an attempt to discover a language which is analysable and codifiable, structuralists have imagined that under the messiness of real life experience lies an ideal form. Such idealizations rest on the assumption that context and social processes are of marginal interest ... (1993a: 12)

It appears that Graddol thinks that it is a mistake to look for ideal forms 'under the messiness of real life experience'. But this is normal scientific practice. Thus, the philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar writes as follows:

The world consists of mechanisms, not events. Such mechanisms combine to generate the flux of phenomena that constitute the actual states and happenings of the world. (1975: 47)

The suggestion that structuralist idealizations 'rest on the assumption that context and social processes are of marginal interest' is also a very odd one. To justify focusing on certain phenomena and setting others aside all one needs to argue is that the phenomena one is focusing on form a natural class. There is no need to argue that the phenomena set aside are of marginal interest. A phonetician does not have to claim that syntax is of marginal interest, she just has to claim that phonetic phenomena are a natural class. Similarly, a student of English literature does not have to claim that French, German, Spanish, etc. literature is of marginal interest, and a student of 19th century history does not have to claim that all other centuries are of marginal interest, and so on. This seems rather obvious.

A further criticism of idealization is advanced in Graddol *et al.* (1994). They remark that

the idealizations which linguists regularly make are as much ideological as scientific ... they represent a particular way of looking at the world rather than an inevitable consequence of an attempt to make systematic sense of scientific data. (1994: 22)

They appear to assume here that scientific ideas are 'an inevitable consequence of an attempt to make systematic sense of scientific data'. Clearly, this is not the case. If they were, humanity would presumably have discovered them all by now. It is fairly clear that we have not and that there are many scientific ideas that are yet to be developed and which therefore human beings have managed to avoid throughout their existence. Perhaps then, Graddol *et al.* mean something else. Perhaps, they simply mean that the idealizations of mainstream linguistics are no better motivated than various alternatives. This could be true, but showing that it is would require some serious discussion of the

motivation that has been advanced for various idealizations, something which Graddol *et al.* do not attempt.

Thus, Graddol is right that mainstream theoretical linguistics sees language as an autonomous mechanism. However, he offers no clear objections to this view.

3. Communication and meaning

A central feature of Graddol's critique is a critical discussion of what he takes to be the views of communication and meaning that mainstream linguistics is based on. Unfortunately for his critique, mainstream linguistics does not in general hold these views.

Graddol (1993a: 9) claims that structuralists are committed to 'the idea that human communication works by transferring ideas from the mind of a speaker into the mind of a listener'.³ It is not obvious what is supposed to be wrong with this idea. Surely successful communication does involve the transfer of ideas from one mind to another? Isn't Graddol attempting to transfer certain ideas about language and linguistics from his mind to the minds of his readers? It seems, however, that what Graddol really objects to is not the idea that communication involves the transfer of ideas from one mind to another but the idea that 'messages are encoded by a speaker-writer-producer, transmitted through the ether and then decoded by a listener-reader-viewer' (1993a: 10). In other words, he objects to what Sperber and Wilson (1986) call the code mode of communication. It seems that Saussure subscribed to this view of communication but it is clear that Chomsky does not. Chomsky (1968) writes that 'The linguist who is trying to determine what constitutes knowledge of a language ... is studying one fundamental factor that is involved in performance but not the only one'. Clearly if knowledge of language is just one factor involved in performance then performance is not a mechanical application of this knowledge, hence not just a matter of encoding and decoding. More recently, Chomsky (1991a: 18) remarks that '... in the real world, virtually any information and strategy can be used to try to determine what some person is saying in a given situation'. This is a fairly unambiguous rejection of the code model of communication.

Graddol goes on to suggest that the code model of communication has certain authoritarian implications. He writes that it 'can legitimate a social authoritarianism which insists on the *moral* correctness of strict adherence to a standard language' (Graddol 1993: 11-12). Of course, this is irrelevant if mainstream linguistics is not committed to the code model of communication. However, it is worth asking whether there is anything in mainstream linguistics that could be seen as providing support for 'strict adherence to a standard language'. As far as I can see, there is nothing that could be seen as doing this. Mainstream linguists give every bit as much attention to non-standard forms as standard forms where they seem to be theoretically interesting. Consider, for example, the endless debates about the syntactic conditions under which *want to* is contracted to *wanna*.⁴ There is also considerable work within mainstream

syntax on non-standard languages, for example, Henry (1995) and Sells, Rickford and Wasow (1996).⁵

Graddol also believes that structuralism has an unsatisfactory view of meaning. He remarks that proponents of the social model argue that 'linguistic structure alone cannot determine meaning' (1993a: 2), and goes on to suggest that they 'see meaning as arising from an interaction between language and social context' (1993a: 16). The implication here is that structuralists including Chomsky think that linguistic structure alone can determine meaning. It is quite clear, however, that Chomsky does not believe this. He writes as follows:

... the thesis of the independence of grammar, in the sense just outlined, does not imply what is in fact false, that the interpretation of sentences by hearers is independent of questions of fact and belief. What is implied is that the contribution of grammar to sentence interpretation is very different in kind from the contribution of fact or belief. (1977: 38)

Thus, Chomsky thinks it is false that the interpretation of sentences by hearers is independent of questions of fact and belief. Hence, he understands very well that linguistic structure alone does not determine meaning. This is hardly surprising given that it is a rather obvious point. Elsewhere Chomsky says the following:

Suppose I have a friend who, I know, teaches a class on Monday and plays tennis on Thursday. Suppose he says to me "today was a disaster". If it is Thursday, I understand him to be saying that he played an awful game of tennis, and if it is Monday, that he taught a terrible class. But these factors of sentence interpretation are easily separable from those that determine the literal, intrinsic meaning of the sentence, and it is surely proper to conclude that quite independent systems are interacting to provide the interpretation. (1977: 40)

Thus, all Chomsky is committed to is the idea that the role of grammar in utterance interpretation can be separated from the role of fact and belief. It is hard to see what objection there could be to this view. Certainly Graddol offers none.

Thus, Graddol's discussion of communication and meaning is directed against positions that are not generally held within mainstream linguistics.

4. Data

Like many other critics of mainstream linguistics, Graddol makes much of data. In particular, he thinks the general reliance on intuitions as a source of data is problematic. It is not really clear, however, what he thinks is problematic about this. Graddol *et al.* (1994: 19) remark that 'The embarrassing fact is that native speaker intuitions about "acceptability" or "grammaticality" are not infallible'. Chomsky, however, does not seem to be embarrassed by this fact. He writes as follows:

It is not that these introspective judgements are sacrosanct and beyond any conceivable doubt. On the contrary, their correctness can be challenged in various ways, some quite indirect. Consistency among speakers of similar backgrounds, and consistency for a particular speaker on different occasions is relevant information. The possibility of constructing a systematic and general theory to account for these observations is also a factor to be considered in evaluating the probable correctness of particular observations... (Chomsky 1964: 79-80)

It is not clear why Graddol *et al.* think there is something embarrassing here. Would they say that it is embarrassing that experiments in psychology or physics are not infallible? Presumably not. None of these things are embarrassing. They are simply a reflection of the fact that scientific research is hard and that there is no infallible method that one can employ. As Bhaskar (1975: 168) remarks, 'Science is work that requires creative intelligence, and there can be no mechanical surrogate for that'.

The alternative to intuitions as a source of data is a corpus of naturally occurring speech or writing. Graddol appears to think that a corpus is a better source of data than intuitions. He writes that 'some of the sentence structures found in real texts are not easily analysable by the grammatical models built using introspective data' (1993a: 8). However, he does not give any indication of what sorts of structures he has in mind. In similar vein, Graddol *et al.* (1994: 21) cite Aarts (1991: 46), who asserts that 'Only linguists who use corpus data will know that a corpus always yields a much greater variety of constructions than one can either find in the literature or think up oneself'. Interestingly other corpus linguists seem to have a different view. Sampson (1987: 26-27), discussing CLAWS, a corpus-based probabilistic parsing system, writes that

We have noted that the performance of CLAWS commonly degrades sharply when a visiting linguist is invited to submit an example of his [sic] choice to it - the reason being that examples which occur readily to professional linguists tend to be 'trick' cases making unusual demands on the reader's/hearer's intelligence.

It seems, then, that good linguists are a better source of interesting data than a typical corpus.

Graddol mentions the criticisms of reliance on a corpus that were made by Chomsky in the 1950's but remarks that the computer has 'acquired the sheer power to overcome some of the limitations of empirical corpus based linguistics which Chomsky rightly identified' (1993a: 7).⁶ It is not clear here whether he understands the limitations of a corpus-based approach.

One problem with a corpus is that it is only as useful as one's ability to search it. There is no problem if one is just interested in lexical statistics, but mainstream linguists are interested in much more abstract matters. One might, for example, want to know whether some language allows parasitic gaps within subjects, in other words, whether it allows sentences like *She is the kind of person that friends of would do anything for*, where there

is a parasitic gap following *of* and an ordinary gap following *for*. There is no mechanical way to search for sentences like this. Hence, one would have to do it by hand. This looks like a good way to waste time. It would clearly be more sensible to ask native speakers.⁷

A further problem with a corpus is that it is difficult to conclude anything from the fact that some type of example does not appear in it. This might mean that such examples are ungrammatical but it might not. This is especially true when the kinds of example one is interested in involve complex syntactic properties. Suppose, for example, that one wants to know whether some language allows parasitic gaps within subjects. If one does not find a relevant example in a million words of text, can one conclude anything? One might conclude something if there was some reason to think that such examples would appear in a million words of text if they were grammatical, but as far as I know, there is no reason to think this.

A final problem concerns meaning. A corpus is just a collection of sounds or marks on paper. In themselves the sounds or marks have no meanings. They are endowed with meanings by native speakers. Hence the only way to find out about meanings is to ask native speakers. Anyone who doubts this should try analyzing a corpus of speech or writing from a language that they do not know.⁸

There is a further point that we can make here. As we have noted, a corpus is a body of naturally occurring data. Sciences do not generally limit themselves to naturally occurring data when it is possible to produce data in various ways. The reason for this is simple. Naturally occurring data is often uninformative. Reality does not cooperate with the scientist's attempts to understand it. Therefore, many sciences conduct experiments to produce data which would not otherwise be forthcoming. As has often been pointed out (Chomsky 1986: 36, Jackendoff 1993: 46-49), investigations of intuitions are informal experiments. It would be as odd for linguists to avoid such informal experiments as it would be for physicists to avoid their much more sophisticated experiments. As Chomsky puts it:

Restriction of grammatical analysis to a real corpus would be about as sensible as restriction of physics or biology to motion pictures of events happening about us in our normal lives. (1980: 199)

In short, a linguistics which confined itself to corpus data would be a very strange discipline.

Thus, there are very good reasons for making use of speakers' intuitions. Corpora may be useful in various ways but they cannot eliminate the need for intuitive data.

5. Speech communities

Graddol *et al.* believe that the notion of a speech community is important for intuition-based research. They assert that 'the use of intuition in any investigation implies

homogeneity among a group of speakers - for an intuition to represent valid data, others must share it' (1994: 23). If this was right, something similar would be true of corpora: a corpus of data from some speaker would only represent valid data if other speakers produced similar corpora. However, this cannot be right. Consider the last speaker of a language. Clearly no one shares this individual's intuitions but no linguist would think that they do not represent valid data. No linguist would think that a language must have at least two speakers for it to be investigated by standard means.⁹

Graddol *et al.* go on to suggest that 'The notion of a speech community has always been a central one in linguistic investigation, but a satisfactory definition has never been agreed' (1994: 23). In fact the notion of a speech community is not central to mainstream linguistics. For Chomsky, language is an individual phenomenon not a social one. It is 'a system represented in the mind/brain of a particular individual' (1988: 36). As for speech communities he says the following:

In ordinary usage ... when we speak of a language, we have in mind some kind of *social* phenomenon, a shared property of a community. What kind of community? There is no clear answer to this question. (1988: 37)

It is fairly clear, then, that the notion of a speech community is not a fundamental one for mainstream theoretical linguistics.¹⁰

Like many others, Graddol (1993a: 10) highlights Chomsky's (1965: 3) suggestion that 'Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community'. Some have seen this formulation as evidence that Chomsky thinks that real speech communities are homogeneous, but of course he is as aware as anyone else that this is not the case. What he is doing here is indicating that he is not concerned with real speech communities.

Graddol also remarks (1993a: 11) that there is no 'notion of conflict or diversity' in Chomsky's 'homogeneous speech community' and no 'sophisticated discussion of how the consensus about linguistic conventions is maintained'. It is clearly right that there is no conflict or diversity in a homogeneous speech community. It is not true, however, that there is no discussion in Chomsky's writings of how the consensus about linguistic conventions is maintained. His account of language acquisition seeks to explain the fact that individuals with quite different linguistic experiences converge on very similar grammars. Thus, this is a partial account of how a consensus is maintained. Chomsky has also discussed in his political writings how a political consensus is maintained and this includes a consensus about the meaning of terms like 'democracy', 'freedom', 'terrorism', etc.

I conclude, then, that Graddol's remarks about speech communities are irrelevant to mainstream linguistics.

6. The postmodern model

Graddol outlines his alternative postmodern conception of linguistics very briefly.¹¹ Much of what he has to say is quite opaque, and the situation is not helped by the fact that he does not cite any actual examples of such work.¹²

Graddol remarks that the postmodern model ‘represents an attempt to understand the fragmentary flux of language not by idealising simple underlying mechanisms but by attempting to tease apart and understand the nature of the fragmentation’ (1993a: 2). Unfortunately, he does not explain what this means. He also remarks that ‘Postmodern approaches to language reflect wider trends in our understanding of the universe and the natural and social world’ (1993a: 17). He goes on to refer to Darwin and Einstein, but he does not explain how postmodern approaches to language reflect their ideas.¹³

Graddol also comments that ‘Diagrams in the form of branching trees had been used both by the early comparativists to represent language relationships and by generative grammarians to represent phrase structure in sentences. The figures illustrating linguistic articles have since become more complex labyrinths; semantic networks in which paths cross and rejoin, in which an infinite number of different routes can be taken and experienced’ (1993a: 17). Clearly there are differences between the formalisms of the 80’s and 90’s and those of 60’s and 70’s but it is hard to see any sense in which contemporary formalisms are postmodernist. At the very least this is an idea which should be supported by some serious argument.

Graddol’s most concrete remark about postmodern theories is that they ‘are concerned pre-eminently with texts, with how texts are produced, and how texts are used and situated within other cultural practices’ (1993a: 18). Graddol (1993a) does not explain what he means by a text. However, Graddol (1993b: 41) defines texts as ‘communicative artefacts’, and emphasizes that they may include both linguistic and other material. On the production of texts, he highlights the complex technological processes that may be involved, and also refers to ‘the ways in which a writer is coerced, gently or not so gently, to conform to generic conventions which may serve the interests of others’ (1993b: 49) and to ‘the processes of selection and editing out of which a news story emerges’ (1993b: 49). On the use of texts, he considers the case of ‘a television interview with an international politician which is sold by a news agency to the domestic television companies of many countries, who will each select different moments and set them within different stories’ and notes that ‘in each case, the programme will be viewed by different people with different interests and experiences of the world, engaged in different social activities ...’ (1993b: 49). No doubt these are interesting matters, but on the face of it they are matters for sociologists to investigate. It is hard to see why anyone would think that they should form the subject matter of linguistics. Someone might claim that any research which is concerned with ‘communicative artefacts’ is *ipso facto* linguistics, but this cannot be right. A historian studying official documents to establish the causes of some historical event is not doing linguistics, nor is a biographer studying the writings of some individual to find out what made him or her ‘tick’, and nor is a sociologist studying the conversations of some teenage group to determine how they see

the world and their place in it. Thus not all questions about communicative artefacts are questions for linguistics. This being so, it is hard to see why the questions that interest Graddol should be. It would be rather more plausible to propose that linguistics is concerned with the linguistic properties of texts. This would mean properties like involving a simple vocabulary, containing a large number of passives, containing many discourse connectives, but not properties like being interesting, being libellous, or being available from all good book shops. The problem with this idea is that it presupposes some understanding of the linguistic properties. This is what mainstream theoretical linguistics seeks to provide. If all the linguistic properties were well understood, one might argue that is time to move on and to concentrate on texts, but this is not the case. There are many linguistic properties of English which are not well understood, and of course English is not the only language. I conclude, then, that Graddol does not have a viable alternative conception of linguistics.

7. Conclusions

I have argued in this note that Graddol's critique of mainstream linguistics is both unconvincing and ill-informed. Unfortunately, it seems quite likely that many outside theoretical linguistics would see it as a sober and sensible assessment. I hope I have shown that it is nothing of the sort.

FOOTNOTES

1. A version of this note was presented at the Gregynog Linguistics Colloquium in April 1997. I am grateful to Gill Brown, Nigel Fabb and Dick Hudson for a number of helpful comments on an earlier version.
2. Essentially the same view is taken by theoretical linguists who reject many of Chomsky's assumptions. Thus Pollard and Sag (1994: 14) write that '... we have accepted the conventional wisdom that linguistic theory must account for linguistic knowledge'. Similarly, Hudson (1992: 29) argues that '...what we are trying to study when we study language is a mental phenomenon, the native speaker's knowledge of the language'.
3. The claim that mainstream linguistics is committed to an untenable view of communication is a central feature of the critical writings of Roy Harris, e.g. Harris (1981). For some discussion see Borsley and Newmeyer (1997).
4. See Pullum (1997) for a recent contribution to this debate.
5. It is perhaps worth noting that it would be rather surprising given his libertarian politics if Chomsky was unwittingly committed to a view of communication with authoritarian overtones.
6. Notice that Graddol appears to equate 'empirical' with 'corpus-based' as if intuition-based research was not an empirical enterprise. This is a very odd idea. If an optician asks me whether some figure is more or less clear when seen through a particular lens, my response is an empirical datum, probably providing some evidence about the nature of my eyesight. In the same way if I ask a speaker whether some sentence is better or worse

when modified in some way, the response is an empirical datum, probably providing some evidence about the nature of the speaker's mental grammar.

7. Of course, if the native speakers are dead or too young you can't do this, but this is a problem that historical linguists and language acquisition researchers cope with as well as they can. No doubt if there were ways of accessing the intuitions of dead people or two year olds, they would be delighted to use them.

8. It is not uncommon for linguists who criticize any use of intuitions to make statements about meaning that could only have been derived from intuitions. For example, Sampson (1975) after arguing that intuitions cannot be a legitimate source of data goes on to assert that 'In English *All apples are round* implies *This apple is round*' (1975: 152) and that '*John is a strict vegetarian and he eats lots of meat ... is contradictory*' (1975: 160). It is fairly clear that these statements derive not from some corpus but from his own intuitions.

9. However, it seems that some philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein's private language argument would assume this. According to Pateman (1987: 65, fn.9), the philosopher Esa Itkonen claims that there must be *three* speakers for one to talk of rules. Pateman argues at length against such views.

10. It is also doubtful whether the notion of a speech community is a fundamental one for sociolinguistics. Thus, Hudson (1996: 29) argues that 'our sociolinguistic world is not organised in terms of objective "speech communities"' and hence that 'the search for a "true" definition of the speech community ... is just a wild goose chase'.

11. For critical discussion of postmodernist ideas see Norris (1990, 1993) and Sokal and Bricmont (1998).

12. There is a similarity here with the writings of Roy Harris. These include numerous references to something called Integrational Linguistics, but no actual examples of this form of linguistics are cited.

13. As Sokal and Bricmont (1998) point out, the claim that postmodernist work reflects developments in the hard sciences is a common one and one that is commonly made without any clear understanding the developments that are cited. Graddol, however, says so little that there is no way of knowing whether he understands the work he is citing.

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