AKADÉMIAI KIADÓ

BOOK REVIEW

András Kertész, **Edith Moravcsik** & **Csilla Rákosi** (eds.). (2019). *Current approaches to syntax. A comparative handbook*. Comparative Handbooks of Linguistics 3. Berlin–Boston: Walter De Gruyter. xvi + 600 pp.

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This extensive and important volume of 21 chapters is reviewed by two committed "Chomskyans". CsP has been doing syntax and in general, form-related sentence processing and child development research combined with an interest in the history of cognitive science for 50 years, while MR is a graduate student with a background in formal syntactic theory and working on a PhD about semantic development using a rather innatist developmental frame. We advance these characterizations of ourselves in order to save the reader from discovering that we are inadvertently somewhat biased, to the extent that we approach the volume from the vantage point of our respective backgrounds.

This handbook gives a broad and in-depth overview of the developments in contemporary syntactic theory, embedded into a history of the last 50 years. It offers not only detailed descriptions of the analytical tools that are employed in different frameworks, but also presents the metatheoretical assumptions underlying each approach. It is the latter aspect that is given most emphasis in this volume and this is not only reflected by the amount of space given to historical background information and meta-theory, but also by the selection of theories, which are pressumably meant to cover a wide range of conceptually distinct frameworks.

The first part of the book consists of 13 chapters in which various experts characterize individual theories along with a sample analysis, including Cognitive Grammar (Cristiano Broccias), Construction Grammar (Rui P. Chaves), Simpler Syntax (Peter W. Culicover & Ray Jackendoff), Lexical Functional Grammar (Mary Dalrymple & Jamie Y. Findlay), the Decathlon Model (Sam Featherston), the Minimalist Program (Norbert Hornstein), Parallel Architecture (Ray Jackendoff & Jenny Audring), Usage-Based Grammar (Ritva Laury & Tsuyoshi Ono), Optimality Theory (Géraldine Legendre), Functional Discourse Grammar (Lachlan Mackenzie), Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (Stefan Müller & Antonio Machicao y Priemer),

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Dependency Grammar (Timothy Osborne) and Combinatory Categorial Grammar (Mark Steedman).

The second part of the book consists of six chapters on metatheory, including studies on syntactic knowledge and intersubjectivity (Philip Carr), hermeneutics and generative linguistics (Esa Itkonen), the uncertainty of syntactic theorizing (András Kertész and Csilla Rákosi), the multiparadigmatic structure of science and generative grammar (Stephen Kornmesser), the philosophy of generative linguistics (Peter Ludlow), the research programme of Chomskyan linguistics (Pius ten Hacken) and the use of the comparison of syntactic theories (András Kertész and Csilla Rákosi).

At the level of specific theories, the different frameworks are presented and compared by reference to a set of uniform characteristics, (called by the editors "parameters") which are "goals", "data", "tools" and "evaluation". Goals are defined in terms of the broader context in which a theory is embedded and therefore may relate e.g. to language acquisition, discourse behavior or crosslinguistic comparison. The other three parameters will be largely determined by the theory's goals. For instance, theories may vary along the parameter "data" with respect to data collection and the domain of well-formed sentences that they take to be relevant for analysis. This parameter thus can capture the differences between approaches that focus merely on competence and such theories which are concerned with structures that arise during performance. How this data is further segmented and categorized depends on the conceptual "tools" deployed by a theory, which refers to the assumed categories and levels of description per se as well as the way relations between syntactic categories and different components of grammar are modeled within a framework. Different approaches may then choose different criteria for evaluating their analysis in terms of simplicity, consistency and empirical adequacy, summarized under the parameter "evaluation".

Chapter 7 (Norbert Hornstein), for instance, describes the goals of the Minimalist Program (MP) as investigating the principles of possible Universal Grammars (UGs), i.e. the underlying structures that delimit the range of possible constructions and languages, based on and derived from existing grammatical theories of UG ("data"). Hence, according to Hornstein actual linguistic structures are treated only indirectly as relevant data. MP attempts to derive the design features of UG which have been proposed during the last decades of generative research, most importantly hierarchical organization and recursion, from a single syntactic operation, Merge ("tools"). Merge as a unified structure-generating mechanism responsible for the structure of linguistic capacity is argued to be the simplest mechanism which may account for the abstract properties of UG and which also sets apart MP from other theoretical approaches as well as previous accounts within the generative framework ("evaluation"). The nativist perspective and mentalist goals of MP may be then contrasted by the reader most sharply with the constructivist view of usage-based approaches (Ritva Laury and Tsuyoshi Ono, Chapter 9), described as aiming at providing structural descriptions of language, how it evolves and is actually used in verbal interactions ("data") and explaining the communicative functions thereof ("goals"), also by taking seriously all the "noise" which is usually subtracted from generative analyses. The concept of grammar within usage-based approaches substantially differs from the generative notion of grammar (or universal grammar) in that it involves flexible and dynamic principles arising from speech in context rather than being an encapsulated hardwired system of the human mind. Since functionally oriented theories are primarily interested in accounting for language in everyday communication, their analyses may involve not only descriptions in terms

of form and function, but also non-verbal aspects and quantitative information, often in a non-formalized format ("tools"). Theories are evaluated in light of actual (surface) structures occurring in actual speech data and with respect to quantitative predictions as such information is thought of being a crucial determinant of form ("evaluation"). Hence, the goals of each theory are closely interrelated with the general perspective on language, the data that are considered as relevant and the analytic tools that are viewed as adequate.

Moreover, and this is due to the focus on historical and conceptual reflections, each chapter offers a brief outline of the historical background of the presented approach and thus allows for a comparison of goals and other characteristics of different theoretical developments within an individual paradigm. To take the example from above, in chapter 7 the minimalist position, while embedded in a historical context of Generative Grammar (GG), is contrasted with common assumptions made in the generative camp (section 1.2. "The minimalist turn"), namely that based on grammatical structures produced by and acceptability judgments evoked in speakers, the object of investigation are two mental states. First, the capacities of a native speaker of a specific language, and second, the biologically determined meta-capacity allowing for the aquisition of such a language (i.e. Universal Grammar). This way, MP is presented not only as a continuation of the generative endeavor, but rather as a more principled manner of theorizing about (possible and actual) grammars. Fragments of analyses are discussed with reference to the parameter "tools" in each chapter, giving insight into the tool kit of the different approaches and further showing how these deal e.g. with constituency, dependency or movement.

At the metatheoretical level, comparison is made on the basis of how each theory handles the question of the internal organization of syntax, grammar and cognition in general. Based on these parameters differences and similarities are elaborated.

The ambitious attempt of providing technical descriptions as well as conceptual background information offers a new and interesting perspective, but also leads to a few shortcomings. On the one hand, the book is obviously not meant to provide a comparison of syntactic analyses. The information given in this volume will probably not help researchers/students to decide between different theoretical accounts and adopt certain tools for their own data analysis. Although explanations in invididual chapters involve a number of sample sentences, only one sample sentence is used throughout the book for full analytical demonstration, thus it becomes not always clear how well-suited the different theories are in specific areas of interest. Here, one would probably need additional information on i) whether and how a certain theory can deal with specific phenomena and ii) how to apply the analytical tools to it, for which other handbooks and literature on the subject matter seem to be more appropriate. Of course, it would have been interesting to find a conclusive evaluation of the various claims and methods from the individual chapters at some point, however, although well-defined parameters of comparison are provided, it is left to the reader to weigh them against each other.

The philosophical issues are packed in Part II. under the label of "metatheoretical foundations". Kornmesser, Ludlow, and Kertész and Rákosi, in two chapters respectively, correctly point out that the the idea that grammars should somehow be theories of a language, combined with the emerging concept of paradigms following Kuhn (1970) in the self reflection of scientists, was crucial in the new self-image of syntactic theorizing. However, when scholars of language face the multiplicity of theoretical models even within the generative enterprise, they tend to claim that modern linguistics has somehow become a "multiparadigmatic" science. This is similar to the ideas proposed by Thomas Leahey (1987) for the history of psychology. In

psychology, if taken literally, this was interpreted as a sign for psychology not really being a natural science. In their willingness for theoretical liberalism the authors of these theoretical chapters do not realize the tensions between this image and the claim of the Chomskyan group that linguistics is a natural science. One would be more reserved by claiming that these varieties are the varieties of theories within a single paradigm.

The theoretical chapters under-characterize the novelty of Chomsky in two crucial regards. One is the issue of creativity in language and its use: this is only mentioned in the minimalist chapter, and merely as side remark. But in reality, for Chomsky creativity is a defining feature of human language, and continued to be central over 50 years (Kenesei 2013) by determining the kind of formal theories to be pursued. In the otherwise meticulously compiled index section of the book, creativity does not figure at all.

The second issue is the parallelism so important e.g. in modern language acquisition research between work of the scientist and the mental work of the individual unconsciously using or acquiring a language. Both are interpreted as theory builders and theory users. This aspect is crucial if we want to understand the inspirational role that the generative move has played in the last half-century by gradually postulating innate structures not only in language but in many other cognitive domains, as pointed out by Spelke (2000) in her influential core knowledge theory.

The theoretical chapters are also very reserved in their interpretation of the biolinguistic message of modern syntactic theory. They hardly at all deal with the issue evolution and when they do deal with it (ten Hacken) they consider it as a matter of the sociology of science like the authority of Chomsky. Questions that were raised at least for a generation after the Pinker and Bloom (1990) challenge, like the question of whether syntax could have evolved gradually or whether it appeared suddenly, are not really addressed.

Regarding the 'brain talk' so popular today, the authors merely mention localization. However, formal syntactic theory has always been involved in issues of temporal organization in the use of formal notions. This brings up the use of event-related brain activities as crucial in supporting form-centered language processing such as in the early syntax use model proposed by Angela Friederici (Friederici 2000). One of course should not expect an in-depth discussion of brain theory in a book that is, after all, about syntactic theory, but some place should have been found to include a more limited discussion relating syntax as a complex sequential organization to the issue of temporal unfolding.

Another issue which the theoretical chapters are very laconic about is methodology. Sometimes (Kornmesser) they classify under methodology the problems of the composition of grammar. Linguistic intuition and its changing status in linguistics, and the resulting changes in the conception of what 'mentalism' is or should be in linguistics are not really dealt with in detail. The chapters show how the new grammar distanced itself from the traditional distribution-based descriptive tradition, but how other research directions such as experimental linguistics have emerged is not covered. The challenges of new corpus data are, however, seriously raised, especially regarding irregulars.

The book puts a strong emphasis on the metatheoretical underpinnings of syntactic theories while attempting to make clear how claims and assumptions of individual theoretical approaches relate to and follow from metatheoretical considerations. It is explicitly addressed at researchers and teachers who are interested in learning more about the conceptual foundations of syntactic theories, especially theories which lie outside their own area of expertise.

In its general frame the book has a combined theoretical and historical flavor. It connects issues of the history of more than half a century of modern syntactic theory and its relations to models of science and its changes and varieties. For the conceptually guided reader, however, the meta-theoretical explanations can also serve as guidance for her own theory building. With its focus on metatheory, this book is exceptional and will be useful especially for readers who are interested in the conceptual level and in search of a systematic comparison at this level.

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