The Range of Language

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In March 1864, at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., several lectures on language and linguistics were given by William Dwight Whitney. Born in Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1827, Whitney had begun studying Sanskrit in 1848, using books that his brother had recently brought back from Europe (Seymour, 1895?, p. 3). His studies proceeded quickly, and he was appointed to the "Professorship of the Sanskrit and its relations to kindred languages, and Sanskrit Literature" at Yale University in 1854, at the age of twenty-seven (p. 9). While Whitney's later work extended well beyond the grammar and literature of Sanskrit—in the 1880s, for example, he would become the editor-in-chief of *The Century Dictionary*, the greatest American lexicographic work of the nineteenth century—his view of language in his talks at the Smithsonian was narrowly focused. Those lectures, which were later expanded and published in 1867 as *Language and the Study of Language: Twelve Lectures on the Principles of Linguistic Science,* dealt mainly with one subject: how languages change over time.

Whitney did speculate about linguistic subjects that are not strictly historical. In his first lecture, for example, he touched on "the nature of language as a human endowment, its relation to thought, its influence upon the development of intellect and the growth of knowledge" (pp. 6–7). He also considered the question of how humans acquire language, telling his American listeners that "we speak English because we were taught it by those who surrounded us in our infancy and growing age.... [T]here was no development of language out of our own internal resources, by the reflection of phenomena in consciousness" (p. 11). While here Whitney might seem to have been taking a position on the controversy that would rage a century later over the existence of an innate human capacity for language, in fact he was merely using the learned acquisition of the sounds and vocabulary of a specific language to set the stage for his account of linguistic change. Because this acquired language is used by diverse individuals, no two of whom speak in precisely the same way, "it is undergoing all the time a slow process of modification, which is capable of rendering it at length another language, unintelligible to those who now employ it" (p. 24). His account of language acquisition was thus merely the starting point for his much longer discussion—which continued throughout his lectures—of the historical process of language change.

Whitney's focus on historical linguistics can be seen as well in his description of the subjects he considered within the range of linguistic science. At first, he seemed to take a generously expansive view:

> Every fact of every language, in the view of the linguistic student, calls for his investigation, since only in the light of all can any be completely understood. To assemble, arrange, and explain the whole body of linguistic phenomena, so as thoroughly to comprehend them, in each separate part and under all aspects, is his endeavour. (p. 6)

But Whitney's range was in fact much narrower, as shown by what he excluded from linguistic study:

> [The linguist] deals with simple words and phrases, not with sentences and texts. (p. 6)

In other words, Whitney's interest was almost exclusively on those elements of language that show most clearly how languages change over time, specifically the pronunciations and meanings of individual words. The many aspects of language that can also be studied—including the grammar of sentences and discourses, the forms and organization of linguistic meaning, the pragmatic uses of speech and writing, and the interactions of language with culture, politics, and other areas of human activity—were explicitly excluded.

While Whitney's alternately expansive ("[e]very fact of every language") and restrictive ("simple words and phrases, not ... sentences and texts") view of language seems contradictory, it makes sense within his historical setting. As Whitney himself and many others have described,[1] the discoveries, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, that Sanskrit is related to the languages of Europe, that the comparison of word roots and morphological systems of related languages can yield insights into not only how the languages have evolved but also the histories and cultures of their speakers, and that the same tools of comparative linguistics could be applied to the previously unwritten languages of the Americas and elsewhere, gave linguists an unprecedented wealth of material to study. It was only natural that scholars like Whitney came to study language mainly within the context of its historical change.

Whitney would not be the last linguist to restrict severely the range of language being studied. Nearly a century after Whitney's lectures at the Smithsonian, Noam Chomsky gave a series of talks on linguistic theory at Indiana University in Bloomington. Later published as *Topics in the Theory of Generative Grammar* (1966), those lectures began with an extended exposition of Chomsky's assumptions about language and its study at that time. He started by describing the distinction between competence ("what the speaker of a language knows implicitly") and performance ("what he does") (pp. 9–10), making clear that he was interested in the former:

> The competence of the speaker-hearer can, ideally, be expressed as a system of rules that relate signals to semantic interpretations of these signals. The problem for the grammarian is to discover this system of rules; the problem for linguistic theory is to discover general properties of any system of rules that may serve as the basis for a human language.... (p. 10)

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[1] In addition to Whitney (1867, pp. 3–6), see also Müller (1866, pp. 164–186), Sayce (1880, pp. 38–51), Bloomfield (1914, pp. 309–314), and Jespersen (1922, pp. 32–40).

While he admits that "[p]erformance provides evidence for investigation of competence," he explicitly excludes from study many factors affecting the use of language: "in the study of grammar we abstract away from the many other factors (e.g., memory limitations, distractions, changes of intention in the course of speaking, etc.) that interact with underlying competence to produce actual performance" (p. 12). The list of largely psychological matters excluded by Chomsky—"memory limitations," etc.—can be expanded to include many social factors that he also ignored then, including the age, gender, and social status of the speaker, the relationship between the speaker and hearer(s), the practical purpose of the utterance, and the immediate situation and the larger cultural context within which the utterance takes place.

For Chomsky at that time, the range of even grammars of competence was narrow. His concern was neither with Whitney's "simple words and phrases" nor with longer discourses. Instead, the goal of his theory of generative grammar was to "specify the set of possible syntactic descriptions for sentences of a natural language" (p. 13). It was the sentence that interested him, and he and other generative grammarians developed elaborate formalisms to describe how grammatical sentences can be generated.

Just as Whitney's focus on words and short phrases grew out of the insight that the interrelations among ancient and modern languages can be traced through those elements, so, too, did Chomsky's focus on sentences emerge from an insight into the nature of language: that sentences are frequently created *de novo* by language users and that the structures of those novel sentences seem to follow regular rules.[2] This property of sentences offered a more fertile field for research on the psychological characteristics of language than did, for example, individual words, which seem to be learned largely through imitation, or longer discourses, which may not be as amenable to rigorous rule-based description. Both Whitney and Chomsky, therefore, restricted the range of language to those aspects which seemed most appropriate and fruitful within the context of their times.

Another restrictive view of language that has emerged from its historical context is found in the field of language education. In 2001, the Council of Europe, an international organization with 47 member countries, issued the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEFR). This guide to organizing second-language curricula and self-study, originally targeted at Europe but increasingly influential elsewhere as well, is known among language educators mostly for its specification of levels of language competence through "Can Do" statements. However, the 264-page, densely written CEFR also presents a comprehensive theoretical view of language and of language's roles in the modern world. It gives a central position, for example, to the concept of plurilingualism, which refers to an individual's experience and use of multiple languages such that the languages "interrelate and interact" with each other (p. 4). It also treats language competence as including not only linguistic ability in a narrow sense—that is, the knowledge and use of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar—but also social

[2] While Chomsky did not claim to have discovered this property of language—in the preface to *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965, p. v), he noted that Wilhelm von Humboldt had made a similar observation in the early 19th century—he and other generative grammarians developed that insight much further than previous linguists had.

and pragmatic skills.

The CEFR's emphasis on plurilingualism and communicative competence can be traced to the historical context from which the document emerged. In the 19th century, the decline of Latin as a common language of Europe, the emergence of powerful nation-states, and the spread of education led to increasingly prominent roles for national languages and, as a consequence, greater challenges for international understanding and cooperation. It would be difficult to claim that communication difficulties were the primary cause of the tragic wars that engulfed that continent during that century and the next. Nevertheless, improved communication among people from different countries and language backgrounds was seen later as important for the peaceful integration of Europe, both in the wake of the Second World War and after the end of the Cold War.

Because the political and economic integration of Europe was pursued based on principles of equality among the states and peoples of the continent, linguistic integration needed to be egalitarian as well. That egalitarianism would have been contradicted by the adoption of a single natural language, such as English or French, as a common tongue, and the failure of earlier efforts to establish an artificial language, such as Volapük or Esperanto, as a neutral auxiliary language discouraged the repetition of such efforts. The concept of plurilingualism thus emerged from the need to respect the equality and diversity of the many languages spoken in Europe.

The CEFR's emphasis on communicative competence had a somewhat different origin. Many of the countries represented in the Council of Europe are also in the European Union, which allows the free movement of citizens among its member countries. Combined with advances in transport and telecommunications, this movement has led to many more Europeans needing to use multiple languages in daily life. As a result, the CEFR reference levels focus on what speakers can actually do with a language—the so-called "action-oriented" approach (p. 9). In a description of the common reference levels intended for self-assessment, for example, the "Can Do" statements for a person's spoken production ability range from "I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know" (A1, the lowest level) to "I can present a clear, smoothly flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points" (C2, the highest level) (pp. 26–27). Note that nowhere is mentioned the traditional criteria used to assess linguistic ability, such as pronunciation, vocabulary size, or grammatical accuracy. The CEFR cares about language as a tool for social interactions, not as a symbolic system for conveying meaning, as a window into human history, or as a psychological phenomenon. Despite its breadth and depth, the CEFR, too, has a limited conception of the range of language.

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Reaching into nearly every area of human life, language is a complex phenomenon with unclear boundaries.

Language's complexity, and our inadequate understanding of it, is especially clear in areas where such understanding would be most useful. Despite decades of research and development and vast improvements in computing power, for example, machine translation is still inadequate for any but the most limited tasks.

And despite centuries of efforts to improve the teaching of foreign languages, most students still fail in their attempts to learn. Such challenges result not merely from the difficulty of imitating the mechanisms of the human brain but also from the immense diversity of language as a social phenomenon and the wide variation in how different individuals understand and use language at different times.

Similarly, it is difficult to delineate between language and other aspects of human behavior. For example, are gestures—pointing, waving, nodding—a linguistic phenomenon? Many linguists do regard them as such, for gestures, like spoken language, can be symbolic, are used for purposeful communication, and are often acquired in their specific forms rather than universal. Facial expressions, such as smiles, frowns, and grimaces, are more problematic, because they seem less symbolic and intentional than gestures are; nevertheless, some people might regard them as a kind of language. What about sweating, blushing, and nervous tremors? Like words and gestures, they can communicate one person's psychological state to others, but they would probably not be regarded as language by many linguists.

Given the complexity and the uncertain extent of language, it is not surprising that many linguists have felt it necessary to limit its range. The problem with this restriction of language study into narrow approaches is that it is so often accompanied by opposition to other approaches. The German philologist Max Müller (1823–1900), for example, was one of many linguists who have asserted that language is a coherent system that transcends the variation in the speech of individuals. In his *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1866), he wrote "although there is a continuous change in language, it is not in the power of any man either to produce or prevent it" (p. 40). This claim came under withering criticism from William Dwight Whitney, who responded that "individuals initiate changes, and the community either accepts and uses them, making them language by its use, or rejects and annuls them by refusing to use them" (1892, p. 19). In other words, while Müller restricted the range of language to those characteristics already shared by a community of speakers, Whitney admitted the contributions of individual idiosyncrasies. This dispute paralleled that between 20th century linguists who, like Chomsky, emphasized linguistic competence and others, like corpus linguists, who focused on actual performance.

Other differences within the field of language can be reduced to disputes over where language begins and ends. Linguists with anthropological bents, for example, encouraged by access to unwritten languages, have given primacy to speech over writing, which was the traditional realm of European philology.[3] Formalist approaches, spurred in part by advances in mathematical logic and computer technology, have regarded language primarily as an abstract structural system, while "social turn" approaches have emphasized language's complex interrelations with human society. Whitney, as we have seen, was interested mainly in the diachronic aspects of language, while today's cognitive grammarians are focused on the synchronic.

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[3] The American anthropologist Edward Sapir, for example, while discussing writing and other nonspeech symbolic systems in *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (1921), stated that "all voluntary communication of ideas ... is either a transfer, direct or indirect, from the typical symbolism of language as spoken or heard" (p. 21).

One area where such controversy is particularly intense is in applied linguistics, especially second-language education, where disputes about what is appropriate to teach in language classes are endemic. Educators who emphasize the abstract, systematic aspects of language call for grammar to be taught explicitly from the first stages of language instruction; those with more psychological views prefer teaching methods intended to yield unconscious acquisition of language abilities; and those who, like the authors of the CEFR, see the realm of language as extending deeply into social interactions advocate pedagogies with strong pragmatic, cultural, and political components. While such disputes among supporters of different educational approaches often originate in diverging perceptions of the needs and abilities of learners, the educators' varying views of what does and does not constitute language also affect their positions on what should be taught in the language classroom.[4]

The differences in these approaches would not matter if the advocates of each approach remembered their limiting assumptions and respected other approaches. Unfortunately, however, as shown by the controversies described above, people studying language too often take excessively stubborn positions on the difficult, perhaps unanswerable question of what exactly constitutes the range of language.

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[4] Discussions of other disputes in second-language education can be found in Gally (2012a) and Gally (2012b).