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“Explicit Methods in Linguistic Theory Construction”

Within the generative tradition in theoretical linguistics, it is standard to develop precise and explicit models of the hypothesized empirical phenomenon under study -- the faculty of human language, narrowly conceived. But the most common way that empirical evidence is related to the developing theory is by way of holistic ``expert judgments'' of professional linguists. At present, virtually no attention has been paid to this aspect of mainstream linguistic methodology. The purpose of this talk is to examine this practice.

Because of the rather long (and heated) debate about the nature of linguistic theorizing, I proceed carefully along these lines. I begin with a simplified but representative example of how a bit of hypothesized linguistic structure is extracted from the relevant evidence. This example shows why some frequent targets of linguistic criticism -- the theoretical model, the /general/ strategies for uncovering and justifying its structure, etc. -- are less vulnerable than they have seemed to some. Moreover, I do not question the accuracy of the judgments (of acceptability, etc.) that are typically a major component of the primary linguistic evidence. Instead, I focus exclusively on the use of expert judgment in the construction and assessment of the larger developing theory.

The characteristics of expert judgments have been studied since at least Paul Meehl's seminal 1954 work. I suggest that this aspect of linguistic theorizing has the trappings of just these sorts of procedures. To the extent that it does, it suggests that an increased use of explicit methods may be of significant advantage to linguistic inquiry.

To motivate this last suggestion, I consider a specific aspect of linguistic theorizing, namely, estimating the amount of linguistic data used in theorizing. The nature of the data generation process in linguistics makes this task nontrivial. Moreover, a small result shows that not just any way of performing such an estimation suffices, whether this estimation occurs explicitly or implicitly in the context of (a component of) expert judgment.

I end by considering a few problems and prospects for the development of explicit linguistic methods. In addition to some difficulties, I also suggest that an increased effort on this front is likely to raise a handful of fundamental issues, both for the foundations of linguistics and for the philosophy of science generally.