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# Verbal art and linguistic science: A second approximation

Art and science share a common vision and a fundamentally common impulse, humanist in its historical roots, with deep roots that can be traced to the Renaissance and the great democratic revolutions of the modern era. The essay "Competence, linguistics, politics and post-avant matters" by Kent Johnson, recently published in *Absent Magazine,* No. 2, http://absentmag.org/, opens a reflection on central points of contact in the dialogue between art and science in the domain of the creative uses of language and related aesthetic genres. The dialogue has not prospered in part because attempts from interested participants have approached it by and large on their own terms, formulated narrowly most of the time. From the perspective of each set of our own terms, surely, there has been no other way to approach the possibility of dialogue, the obstacle, rather, having been in our narrowness. This in fact might be among the defects of this very commentary, cautious and modest in its proposals as they are intended to be. My commentary will be restricted for now to Johnson's essay, coming at it from the "science side" of the dialogue. From our vantage point, the idea of an exchange of this kind holds out great promise; so it was with great interest that I read the essay (by the way, on my part, no pretense of offering a representative view is intended either).

To mention one motivation for pursuing the verbal art-linguistics dialogue: only a human language faculty can create poetry, for example; and only this faculty, in interaction with other uniquely human capacities, is endowed with the necessary competencies that allow us to mentally construct an aesthetic response to it. Interestingly, a parallel or homologous endowment seems to apply to the invention, performance, and perception of music. So the study of literary

creation can help us understand these faculties and capacities better. How do aesthetic genres spring forth and develop, in children for example? Perhaps the biggest promise involves casting a glimmer of insight on their origins in human evolution, together with some of the more specific grammatical components of the knowledge of language.

The essay begins with a critique of an important discussion in Language Poetry regarding the extent to which grammatical forms might contribute to upholding oppressive and undemocratic power structures, or least that the dominant social order is reflected in grammar in some non-trivial way. The underlying, more fundamental, question here is: what aspects of grammar are socially constructed? Posing it in these terms, Johnson implicitly opens the door to the possibility (heretical, for sure, to proponents of the strong version of social-constructivism) that only some aspects (many, a great number of relevant aspects, etc., *but not all aspects*) of language competence are constructed or determined by the constraints imposed by society and culture. If grammatical forms "mirror" existing social orders, at what level, he asks, might there be evidence of this reflection: in the phonological patterns of speech, in morphology, syntax? This manner of approaching the problem happens to be one way of getting off dead center in what has been so far a difficult and not very illuminating discussion. In the realm of how we use language – the culturally specific metaphors, rhetorical devices, the way we organize discourse, normative conventions, and the prescriptive rules of proper usage – no reasonable person would deny that preconceptions of culture, social outlooks of all kinds, and ideology, even of the most radical and bizarre sort, influence many aspects of expression and understanding. And here, in this realm of language use, we could take each exemplar on a case by case basis. Some claims of ideological/social construction might turn out to be plausible, some speculative but still

interesting, and others without any substance whatsoever. But we now have to beg the question: how far down does this influence reach?

Johnson goes on to reference linguistic theories and some of the differences in approach that musicians, creative writers and critics and analysts of literature might find useful for their work. To be clear, most linguists who study the nature of competence (i.e., knowledge of language) pay little attention to debates about prescriptive grammar, how anyone should/should not speak or write, or what might be proper or correct, this indifference applying, almost equally, to both Cognitive/Functionalist theorists and their generativist/Universal Grammar-oriented colleagues. Rather, the very hard questions related to the underlying knowledge structures and functions of mind, the fundamental nature of the uniquely human faculties of language, music and other aesthetic capabilities are what have captured the imagination of researchers most intensely. In linguistic science, the counterpart to the study of prescriptive and customary language use is the description of the underlying structures, the design features of knowledge, and the component parts of language ability. The interest here is what characterizes the mental grammar of any and all speakers of whatever variety of language: standard dialect, vernacular, non-standard, indigenous, and creole alike. In this domain, the problem of how much mutual influence there is between grammatical competence, on the one hand, and politics, ideology and culture on the other is one that is far from being settled. And in the end the standard social determinist assumptions on this score may turn out to be far off the mark. But again, the relevant questions are very much still open. Not coincidentally, these concerns might be the same ones that bring us to a common forum together with artists and critics of art. The actual common ground here might have something to do with a shared curiosity for primitive elements and essential properties.

As the interchange proceeds, each side should welcome the observations of the other about its competing tendencies and theories. Linguists, for example, should be interested in how observers outside the field understand the opposing hypotheses on broad questions, especially the ones that cross over. Recent developments in linguistics and cognitive science more generally should in fact make these explorations more inviting. The beginnings of a new realignment, for example among generativists, has cast previous and remaining debates with functionalist and cognitive linguists in a different light, crucially, one that has incorporated a measure of self-critique of some of Universal Grammar's more doctrinaire assumptions. This attempt at convergence, still limited and hypothetical, should allow for an opening for those of us outside the discipline (this writer is not a linguist either) to look for other, as yet unforeseen, opportunties.[1] Writers and artists might also want to take stock of how positions have shifted, and keep an open mind about the implications of applying the framework of any one theoretical approach. This also means that we can avoid prematurely characterizing one tradition or another as being more compatible or relevant to a given problem of artistic creation. Even among the mainstream tendencies, within each tradition, locked more tightly into their respective models, we would not expect that any one of them would "line-up" consistently on a debate in Language Poetry, for example. The analytical tools at linguists' disposal only allow for the most tentative approximation to any given set of opposing views, a good way to get started in any case. At the level of discourse, in relation to stylistic questions, and problems of genre and register, there have never been clear demarcations of separation. And in the realm of sentence and word level grammar, there is no reason to think that any of the current theoretical models would provide more useful insight than any other beyond the most general observation. One interesting

approach might involve the two related but also diverging senses of the term "license." But we shouldn't expect to see any hard and fast commitments here either.

Returning to Johnson's essay, the question is asked (with a Cognitive Linguistics perspective in mind): "in what sense … would grammar, as the subconscious mapping of temporal and spatial frames that govern speaking and understanding represent ideational refractions of this or that set of power relations? Is it that these mental processes are primarily enacted, at depth, by sociological stuff? How so if so?" If we accept that much of, *if not all of,* the actual mental grammar, comprised of the subconscious frames, the inner workings and interfaces that integrate the vast knowledge network of language, is *not subject to awareness*, one hypothetical answer to Johnson's pointed question turns out to be quite surprising. *This* construal of grammar might not represent, nor be determined by, power relations and sociological stuff, in any sense. In a different sense, there must be all variety of live connection and interface between phonology/morphology/syntax and semantics, and in turn with the entire wider context of meaning. But it is likely that the core grammatical structures do not allow the unlimited and unconstrained penetration of our beliefs, prejudices, cultural predispositions and political preferences. Whatever the nature of these interfaces between semantics per se and the strictly linguistic components of grammar turns out to be, it's not likely, again, that we have the ability to deliberately and consciously reflect upon their inner workings, the internal mechanisms of this "way station" between sound and meaning (to borrow an apt description from Jackendoff).[2] All of this of course poses a severe obstacle for proponents of the theory that all aspects of language, including all components of grammar knowledge, are influenced by one's ideological obligations and position in society. The obstacle appears even more difficult to overcome for the claim that mental grammatical structures lend support somehow to this or that

social project or political worldview. Few people would deny that there is a connection between linguistic forms and concepts; if you accept that there are interfaces between syntax and semantics, then there has to be some kind of relationship. But the problem is multifaceted and is not well served by the everything-is-a-part-of-everything method of analyzing complex systems.

Now it just might be that these same general considerations are relevant to the essential properties of other complex human faculties such as musical cognition, presenting the possibility of a fundamental and organic intersection among linguistic knowledge, music, and the different forms of verbal art. The possibility of a common or at least overlapping genesis in prehistory lets us talk about fundamentals in a new way, even from the point of view of biological endowments that underlie these competencies.[3] During the period of dominance of behaviorism, in the "West," and socialist realism, in the "East," ideas like these were viewed as weird and mysterious, even dangerous. The idea was that "human nature" could be anything that social forces shape it into. There is still an aura of mystery and uncertainty about all of this, but that's what should help keep the lines of dialogue open for a while to come.

**Notes**

[1] Interested readers are invited to consult a bibliography under construction at <http://oak.ucc.nau.edu/nf4/> that includes links for further study and discussion on the topic of this review.

[2] Jackendoff, R. (1994). *Patterns in the mind.* New York: Basic Books.

[3] Francis, N. (2006). La ruta de Alejo Carpentier: Teoría de los orígenes de la música y los géneros estéticos. *Tamkang Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 28, 123-161.

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