

*Sprachtheorie und germanistische Linguistik*, 22.2 (2012), 157-175  
© Copyright 2012 by Nodus Publikationen (Münster), ISSN 1218-5736

---

András Kertész

## **Inconsistency and the dilemma of intuitionistic research in generative syntax\***

### **Abstract**

The paper is a contribution to the current debate on linguistic data and evidence. It raises two questions: (a) What kinds of inconsistency do emerge in generative syntax? (b) How are these kinds of inconsistency to be evaluated with respect to the workability of the syntactic theory at issue? As a first step, a system of paraconsistent logic is introduced which distinguishes between weak and strong inconsistency. While weak inconsistency is harmless, strong inconsistency is destructive. Second, a case study demonstrates that in generative syntax weak inconsistency may be a useful tool of problem solving. Third, two further case studies show that intuition as a data source triggers the emergence of strong inconsistency in generative syntax. Finally, this results in a methodological dilemma with far-reaching consequences.

*Keywords:* generative linguistics, paraconsistency, contradiction, inconsistency

---

\* Work on the present paper was supported by the Research Group for Theoretical Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences as well as the projects OTKA K 77823 and TAMOP 4.2.1./B-09/1/KONV-2010-0007.



Consequently, a scientific theory which includes a contradiction may make arbitrary claims about the world and should therefore be deemed *irrational*.

Nevertheless, there is a third aspect as well which may overrule the destructive consequences of these views. Namely, as we know, the Analytical Philosophy of Science no longer prevails. During the current renewal of the philosophy of science, it has been also realised that the emergence of a contradiction in a scientific theory is not necessarily destructive. Current philosophy of science has re-evaluated the structure and function of contradictions in scientific inquiry as follows (see e.g. the contributions in Meheus 2002):

(i) There may be different kinds of contradiction and contradictions may play different roles in scientific theorising. Therefore, their evaluation should depend on their particular properties:

Researchers rarely reject a promising approach on the ground that it is apparently inconsistent. Conversely, inconsistency does not necessarily kill all promise of problem-solving success. *Not all inconsistencies are equal*. Some are profound while others are mere nuisances, rough spots to tiptoe around. (Nickles 2002: 20f.; emphasis added)

Accordingly, there may be contradictions which are not disastrous that is which do not lead to the collapse of the theory at issue.

(ii) There have been logics elaborated which facilitate the tolerance of certain kinds of contradiction, while at the same time, they are capable of avoiding logical chaos:

[...] we are left with the task of better understanding how inconsistency and neighboring kinds of incompatibility are tamed in scientific practice and the corresponding task of better modeling idealised practice in the form of *inconsistency-tolerant logics and methodologies*. (Nickles 2002: 2; emphasis added)

Such logics are called *paraconsistent*. Accordingly, they seem to provide tools for the reconstruction of certain contradictions emerging in scientific inquiry. Paraconsistent logics may account for cases in which the contradiction between the data and the hypotheses does not make the theory at issue unworkable.

Against the background sketched, we will proceed as follows. In Section 2, we will introduce a particular approach to paraconsistent logic which we expect to be able to differentiate between *weak* and *strong* inconsistency. Section 3 will be devoted to a case study which exemplifies the emergence of weak inconsistency in generative syntax. In Section 4 we will discuss two case studies aiming at the ex-























more prominent than in English. On the other hand, he refers to a great number of data representing the construction '*there-seems-to-be* + plural NP'. Thus, the judgment is in opposition to (16):

(17) There seems to be many people in the room.

He concludes that such phrases may witness the existence of a different construction with separate syntactic properties:

We can adduce language-internal reasons (English verb-'subject' concord) for which the construction might be counted as ungrammatical, justifying the feeling of unacceptability which it provokes in some subjects. But the very assumption that the concord rule applies to *there is* sentences in English is open to question. We should not assume that phrases like [12] necessarily observe the standard concord regime: they may already constitute a distinct construction with an autonomous syntax. This hypothesis would explain the intuitions of those speakers for whom [12] is acceptable. Given that we also suspect that for some speakers at least the judgement of ungrammaticality is influenced by prescriptive considerations, **it is very unclear how to proceed: which intuition is relevant for theory construction**, and how can we untangle it from prejudices, perhaps deeply held, about correct or proper speech? (Riemsdijk 2009: 615; bold emphasis added)

This boils down to the fact that there are two contradicting hypotheses:

(18) In English Verb-subject concord applies to the construction '*there-seems-to-be* + plural NP'

(19) In English Verb-subject concord does not apply to the construction '*there-seems-to-be* + plural NP'.

In analogy to the example discussed in the previous subsection, here we find three contradictions again: two between data and hypotheses, and one between two hypotheses. From the point of view of inconsistency, here again the problem is that a clear separation of (18) and (19) by associating them with two different component possible worlds of a superposed possible world is not possible:



there may be a set of data that is based merely on the intuition of a single individual (e.g. Grewendorf) or at least a very small group of individuals (Hornstein et al.). Considering for example Grewendorf's data as belonging to one of the possible worlds and those of the experimentees as belonging to the other, would lead to the *absurd* consequence that, based on Grewendorf's very specific data, specific hypotheses have to be constructed, and, based on the latter, a specific grammar of an individual. Likewise, the paraconsistent resolution of the inconsistency in the third case study would mean to construct a specific grammar of a very small group of individuals like Hornstein and his co-authors. Accordingly, the intuitionistic methodology of generative syntax faces a *dilemma*: as long as the data type to be considered is grammaticality judgments and the data source is the intuition of native speakers, the theory may result *either in strong inconsistency or in absurdity*. Neither of these options is an attractive perspective.<sup>10</sup>

## References

- Borsley, Robert D. (ed.)(2005): *Data in Theoretical Linguistics* [= *Lingua* 115: 1475–1665].
- É. Kiss, Katalin (1987): *Configurationality in Hungarian*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- Featherston, Sam (2007): Data in generative grammar: The stick and the carrot. In: Sternefeld (ed.)(2007), 269-318.
- Featherston, Sam & Winkler, Susanne (eds.)(2009): *The Fruits of Empirical Linguistics. Vol. 1: Process*. Berlin & New York: de Gruyter.
- Hornstein, Norbert, Nunes, Jairo & Grohmann, Kleanthes K. (2005): *Understanding Minimalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grewendorf, Günther (1988): *Aspekte der deutschen Syntax. Eine Rektions-Bindungs-Analyse*. Tübingen: Narr.

---

<sup>10</sup> See Kertész (2011) for the discussion of further consequences of this insight.



Sternefeld, Wolfgang (ed.)(2007): *Data in Generative Grammar* [= *Theoretical Linguistics* 33/3: 269–413].

Winkler, Susanne & Featherston, Sam (eds.)(2009): *The Fruits of Empirical Linguistics. Vol. 2: Product*. Berlin & New York: de Gruyter.

Prof. Dr. András Kertész  
University of Debrecen  
Department of German Linguistics  
H-4010 Debrecen  
Pf. 47  
kert.esz@freemail.hu