Commentary on Evans and Levinson

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Against Taking Linguistic Diversity at "Face Value"

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Abstract: E&L advocate taking linguistic diversity at "face value". Their argument consists of a list of diverse phenomena, and the assertion that no non-vacuous theory could possibly uncover a meaningful unity underlying them. I argue, with evidence from Tlingit and Warlpiri, that E&L's list itself should not be taken at face value — and that the actual research record already demonstrates unity amidst diversity.

From a distance, the structures of the world's languages do look gloriously diverse and endlessly varied. But since when is it sound strategy to take diversity at "face value"? All other sciences have progressed precisely by taking *nothing* at face value — diversity included. E&L claim, in effect, that linguistics is fundamentally different from all other fields. If they are right, the search for deeper laws behind linguistic structure is a fool's errand, and languages are just as inexplicably diverse as they seem at first glance.

Given their sweeping objections to an entire field of inquiry, it is particularly surprising that E&L's paper contains no discussion of the actual research to which they supposedly object. Instead, the paper offers only (1) a parade of capsule descriptions of phenomena from the world's languages, coupled with (2) repeated assertions that each phenomenon falls outside the scope of all (non-vacuous) general theories of linguistic structure. The argument must therefore rest on two premises: (1) that the capsule descriptions of phenomena are correct; and (2) that these phenomena fall so obviously beyond the pale of research on universal grammar that no further argument is necessary. I believe that there are reasons for caution about the first supposition and that the second is simply wrong. I limit myself to a few examples.

Confidence in the accuracy of the data itself is undermined at the outset by comparison of E&L's claims with their sources. For example, as a demonstration that "semantic systems may carve the world at quite different joints", E&L cite Mithun's (1999, 81) discussion of an "unexpected number" marker in Jemez

(misidentified by E&L as Kiowa). It is supposedly because legs come in pairs and stones do not that the number marker, when added to "leg", means "any number but two", but when added to "stone" means "exactly two". Mithun actually notes, however, that the number marker's meaning does *not* directly correlate with the semantics of the noun to which it attaches, but rather with the noun's membership in a particular Noun Class — a phenomenon only partially correlated with the noun's semantics (cf. Indo-European gender). In Jemez, "nose" belongs to the same class as "leg", and "arm" belongs to the same class as "stone." Thus if the number marker truly indicates how Jemez speakers "carve the world", "one" must be an unexpected number of noses, but an expected number of arms (cf. Harbour 2006). Similarly, though E&L list Mundari ideophones as an exemplar of a "major word class" whose very existence "dilutes the plausibility of the innatist UG position", their source for Mundari, Osada (1992, 140-144) actually does not discuss ideophone syntax or morphology at all. Mayan positionals are presented as making the same point. But though they do constitute a distinct category of *root* (from which speakers derive words belonging to the standard word classes), they do not appear to constitute a syntactically distinguishable *word* class themselves, at least not in Mam (England 1983, 78), Tzotzil (Haviland 1994, 700), Chol (Coon and Preminger 2009), or Tzeltal (Brown 1994, 754; cited by E&L) .

Even if E&L's data sources had been cited with perfect care, however, there is a more significant danger in arguments founded on capsule descriptions. Because a daunting array of puzzles faces any researcher who investigates any language, even the best descriptions are always incomplete and provisional. Fundamental generalizations often remain undiscovered for years, until a creative (and lucky) researcher suddenly asks the key question whose answer unlocks one of the language's secrets. And how does one find such key questions? As it happens, among the most productive question-generating devices is the very idea that E&L deride: that languages share a significant array of structural properties, often masked by undeniable differences. Again and again, investigations guided by this possibility have radically enhanced our basic picture of the world's languages.

Consider, for example, E&L's assertion that "syntactic constituency...is not a universal feature of languages", advanced because of the existence of languages with "free word order". As E&L note, it is common to posit for such languages a constituent structure like that of English — but with greater possibilities for displacement of constituents. Although E&L attribute the appeal of such analyses to mere anglophone prejudice, their appeal actually rests on a large and growing body of hard-won *results*, achieved by researchers pursuing lines of inquiry that no one had previously thought to pursue.

One recent example is Cable's (2007; 2008) investigation of *wh*-questions in Tlingit (Na Dene, Alaska), a language with considerable freedom of word order. In languages with fairly rigid word order, there is a well-known split in how they form *wh*-questions. In languages like English and Italian, interrogative *wh*-phrases move to a dedicated position near the left periphery of the clause, possibly preceded only by discourse topics (cf. *This book, who would read it?*; Rizzi (1997). In languages like Chinese and Korean, by contrast, there is no dedicated position for *wh*-phrases. Instead, they appear wherever their non-interrogative counterparts would:

(1) a. **English**

   Who did John see?

   b. **Chinese** (Huang 1982)

   Zhangsan kajian-le **shei**

   Zhangsan see-asp   who

At first glance, Tlingit appears to pattern with Chinese rather than English in lacking a dedicated *wh*-

position, as one might expect if free word order entails absence of constituent structure: The word orders in (2) are also all available in non-questions:

(2)   **Tlingit** (Cable 2007; 2008)

    a. Yá x'úx'   **aadóo**ch   sá kgwatóow?

       this book   who-erg   Q   he.will.read.it

       'Who will read this book?'

    b. **Aadóo**ch   yá x'úx'   sá kgwatóow?

       who-erg   this book Q   he.will.read.it

       (= a)

    c. Kéet   **daa**   sá **axá**?

       killer.whale what   Q   he.eats.it

       'What do killer whales eat?'

On the basis of his fieldwork and analysis of Tlingit texts, Cable showed that, contrary to appearances, Tlingit *wh*-phrases actually do occupy a dedicated *wh*-position — in fact, a position syntactically and semantically identical to its counterpart in languages like English. Specifically, Cable discovered that phrases to the left of the *wh*-phrase (e.g. 'this book' in (2a) and 'killer whale' in (2c)) are always interpreted as discourse topics. A non-topical phrase in the same position blocks the interpretation of the sentence as a *wh*-question. (Tlingit *wh*-phrases also function as indefinite nominals.) Furthermore, if a *wh*-phrase appears to the *right* of the verb (not shown in (2)), the result also cannot be interpreted as a *wh*-question. All these findings can be explained quite simply if the interrogative phrase in both Tlingit and English moves to the same position at the left periphery, where only a discourse topic can precede it. Thus, at least some of the structure of Tlingit is English-like, despite first impressions. Crucially, these findings constitute a *discovery*, not anglophone prejudice. Earlier excellent work on Tlingit had failed to note the evidence for a *wh*-position. Cable's discoveries were made precisely because he chose a path of investigation informed by what linguists already knew about *wh*-questions in other languages.

In contrast to Tlingit, which might be classified as a "free *phrase* order" language in E&L's typology, the Australian language Warlpiri is the "free *word* order" language *par excellence* — allowing even more spectacular freedom. It is thus especially instructive that discoveries like Cable's have also been made for Warlpiri by Legate (2001; 2002), building on research by Laughren (2002) and the late Ken Hale. Legate argues that the left periphery of the Warlpiri clause contains a dedicated *wh*-position preceded by a topic position, just like Tlingit and English. More generally, she shows that key tests that have diagnosed other types of constituent structure in languages like English yield the same results in Warlpiri — a remarkable discovery, directly attributable to the very research program that E&L call bankrupt.

Questions like those addressed by Legate and Cable must be asked for every item in E&L's linguistic *Wunderkammer*. Are they truly as "different" as they seem? Sometimes, of course, the answer might be "yes". But how will we ever distinguish real differences from those that merely reflect our ignorance if we grant — even for an instant — E&L's dictum that apparent structural differences must just "be accepted for what they are"?

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