

Habilitation Thesis Review

Title: Investigations of Explanatory Strategies
in Linguistics

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The reviewed book is a comprehensive monograph on explanation in linguistics. Before beginning the review, I would like to express how important explanation is. It is what separates science from mere encyclopedism; the entire topic deserves a far greater place than it currently occupies in linguistics, and this book is an important contribution to the international discourse, as it is conceived rigorously and written in pleasantly accessible English.

The book is, in essence, a very long answer to the question of whether pure linguistics possesses explanatory power. It proceeds from the following statement:

“If the conceptual foundations of the theory are to be purely linguistic, then this is possible only when the theory becomes a linguistic description without any explanatory power. If a linguistic theory is to be explanatory, then this is possible only when it moves to another discipline and bases its conceptual foundations on it.”

The book argues in favor of this premise and attempts to find a way to deal with it — that is, what mode of explanation linguistics has at its disposal so as not to be dependent on other disciplines.

In writing this review, I tried to put myself in the shoes of someone who finds this premise useful, thereby bracketing my own view of linguistics as a field inherently intertwined with many other branches of *science*. In my view, there is no such thing as pure linguistics, simply because no discipline is pure. We divided all-encompassing philosophy into individual disciplines because it became impossible at a certain point to grasp it in its entirety rather than because there were any *a priori* boundaries between sciences that needed to be (or even could be) respected. The fact that linguistics exists as a separate discipline is due

to language being important enough for us to assign it its own field of study early on, not because it could somehow function independently per se. Had anthropology or information science existed before Pāṇini, there is no reason why linguistics would not have become a subfield of anthropology or information science.

Pure linguistics does not exist, just as pure biology does not exist. Biology studies emergent phenomena above physics and chemistry. However, the fact that these phenomena are emergent does not mean we can fully explain them independently of physics and chemistry; for the fundamental principles that can explain many things in biology, one must quite often make detours into many other fields.

In essence, the only science that attempts any kind of self-sufficiency is physics. This is, in my view, the reason why it is problematic that at a certain point the book leans heavily on physics. This physics-centrism is, in my opinion, the greatest weakness of the entire book. Linguistics is not like physics and there is no reason it should be. If we were to draw inspiration from anywhere, it should rather be from biology (ethology), memetics and epidemiology (the diachronic perspective), information science (communication efficiency), anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics, and all the other sciences that deal with living beings and communication (since linguistics ultimately studies methods of communication among living beings).

When searching for sources of explanation in linguistics, no hierarchy of sciences from more fundamental to less fundamental (physics → chemistry → biology → anthropology → linguistics) applies either. For instance, many phenomena in language cannot be explained without recourse to historiography or religious studies. Moreover, unlike physics, where teleology is a forbidden word, in linguistics we can boldly venture into teleological speculations — for example, the orthographic system of Turkish is entirely dependent on the decision of a few men who happened to be in power and who made their decisions with a certain intention, a certain goal, a telos. After all, language is used by people who themselves tend to have intentions, and this manifests not only in the message itself but also in the method by which the message is communicated, i.e., in language.

Personally, as a linguist rather than an epistemologist, I am more accustomed to reading empirical studies that can be evaluated based on their methodological soundness, the compromises the authors had

to make, and how honestly they report their results. I am therefore not accustomed to evaluating a philosophical work that contains no data. Perhaps the most important evaluative criterion for me for this genre is how thought-provoking and inspiring the work is, while remaining rigorous. In these respects, Zámečník's book excels.

The author demonstrates enormous breadth of knowledge not only in linguistics and epistemology but in a host of other fields that happen to be necessary for the argumentation. This is by no means mere name-dropping; every digression is a treat that the reader looks forward to. The reading was particularly engaging for me because in the second half, the book critically examines and contextualizes quantitative linguistics, specifically that branch of quantitative linguistics whose discourse I have been striving to be part of for two decades (the community around IQLA and the journals JQL and Glottometrics). In this regard, I am grateful for a wealth of observations concerning not only the history of quantitative linguistics but also its potential futures.

Overall, I would characterize the work as highly innovative and at the same time well grounded in the existing body of literature. In my opinion, the work meets the requirements for a habilitation thesis, and I recommend it for further proceedings in the habilitation process.

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