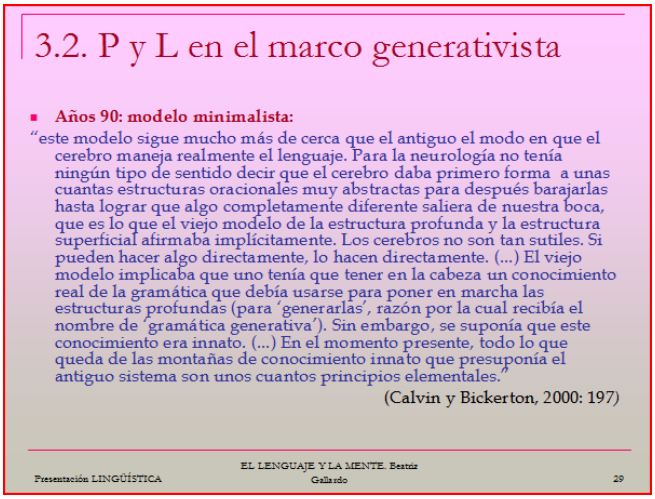
03. Commonplaces in Clinical Linguistics

03.04. Language, grammar and pragmatics.

The predominance of generativist models in the literature on language pathologies explains the customary reductionism between language and grammar, another commonplace in the literature.

As is known, Generativism attempts to explain the way in which grammars can generate infinite utterances (creativity of the speaking subject) from a finite number of grammar rules. The main focus of interest is syntax, although successive Chomskyian models develop the phonological, morphological and, ultimately, semantic components.



The reference point for assessing and for describing the impairment, is grammatical competence, and therefore any element that can be attributed to social, geographical or psychological variation (registers, dialects and idiolects) are excluded from the description. The specific performance of the speakers is not at stake, rather their abstract knowledge of grammatical rules.

To speak of generativism without defining the specific model referred to is to be hugely reductionist. The most well-defined generativist models are those known as

- standard theory,
- extended standard theory,
- generativist semantics,
- government and ligament (also with many theories: government, X, case, θ, ligament, annotation, government),
- principles and parameters,
- move alpha,
- X-bar theory, etc.
- minimalist model (1995): the elimination of almost the whole formal apparatus formulated over the years (the distinction between Deep and Superficial Structure, formation rules, transformational rules, etc.) reducing grammar to a series of very abstract innate principles (Bruckart 1987: 13-23)[1].

Therefore, from the generativist view, the only important thing is the characterisation of the abstract grammatical code. The issue is not that this approach ignores the existence of

[1] Brucart, José M.: *La elisión sintáctica en español* (Syntactical elision in Spanish). Bellaterra: Servei de Publicacions de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 1987, S. 13-23.

pragmatics, of use or of performance. The issue is that the description of such facts is of no interest. In "Language and Unconscious Knowledge" (1978), Chomsky[2] distinguishes between

a) grammatical competence: computational aspects of language, which involve a knowledge with form and signified.

b) pragmatic competence: knowledge of the appropriate conditions of use, and of how to use grammatical and conceptual resources for a particular end (p.59); this would be a component of the mental state of "knowing a language". Pragmatic Competence would be confined to *"knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use, in conformity with various purposes"* (p. 224), and would place language *"in the institutional setting of its use, relating intentions and purposes to the linguistic means at hand."*

On other occasions, the opposition between *I-language (internalised language)*and *E-language (externalised language)* is dealt with, thus aiming to account for both aspects; as has been said, the distinction exists in theory but is not incorporated into linguistic analysis (to the extent that it is a grammatical analysis). It is worth quoting the work of Chantal Hernández (2002)[3] in respect of the need to study real language, as it is used, and the objections raised by a scientific study whose arguments are based on the researcher's intuition and exclusive reference to mother tongue:

The direct result of the radical separation between competence and performance proposed by Chomsky places the linguist (as competent native speaker) in a privileged position, as they only need to resort to their intuitive knowledge of the language (their ability to interpret the sentences of a language) in order to formulate the grammar of their language. In this way, the linguist becomes "the sole explicandum of linguistics" (McEnery and Wilson 1996: 9)[4]and their intuition (in the form of sentences invented by them) serves as the basis for illustrating the grammatical theory they are formulating. The problems this scientific procedure can lead to, and the relationship it discusses between theory and data are evident and have been highlighted by the majority of corpus linguistics scholars referred to above. Sinclair insists in a number of works (1987b, 1991, 1992a, 1996, inter alia)[5] on the possible inconsistencies or inexactitudes of linguistic intuition, even considering some cases in which the native speaker may simply not have sufficient intuitive knowledge to formulate some part of the theory.

In fact, the greatest problem caused by using linguistic intuition as the only theoretical evidence is the circularity that assumes the linguist uses their intuition as data for analysis where it is known beforehand what is being proved. In any scientific field, it is taken for granted that scientists develop theories for describing and explaining phenomena that already exist, arising from a series of external data or experiments. A scientist is not expected to invent their own data at the same time they invent the theory, or even to invent the data afterwards, in order to prove the theory (Stubbs 1996: 29)[6].

* * * *

[2] Chomsky, N. (1978): "Language and Unconscious Knowledge", in J.H. Smith (Ed): *Psychoanalysis and Language,* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, pp. 3-44. Reprinted in Chomsky (1980): *Rules and representations,* pp. 217-54, 287-290.

[3] Hernández Pérez, Chantal (2002): *Explotación de los córpora textuales informatizados para la creación de bases de datos terminológicas basadas en el conocimiento (Using computerised text corpora for the creation of knowledge-based terminological databases), Estudios de Lingüística Española, 18.*

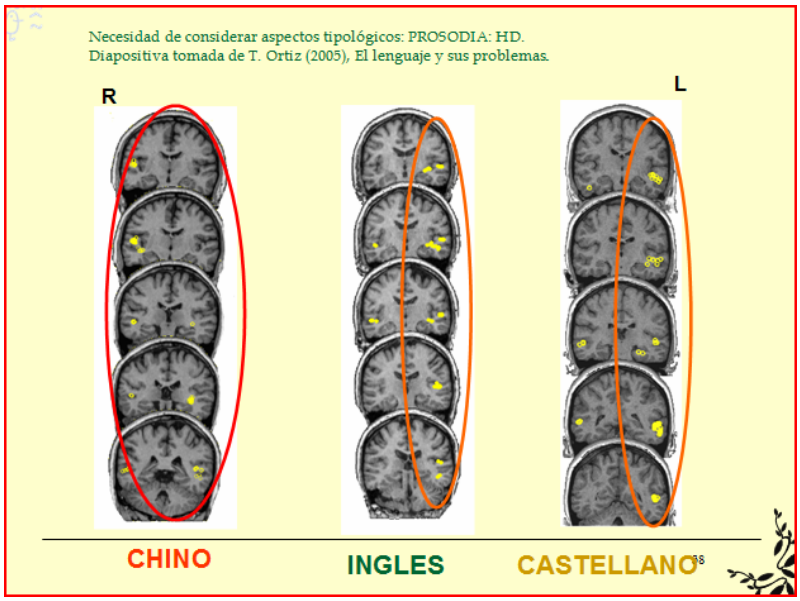
[4] **McEnery, Tony and Wilson, Anddrew** (1996): *Corpus Linguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

[5] Sinclair, John M. (ed.) (1987b). Looking Up: an Account of the COBUILD Project in Lexical Computing. London: Collins;
Sinclair, John M. (1991). Corpus, Concordance, Collocation. Oxford: Oxford University Press;
Sinclair John M. (1992a). "Trust the Text", in Davies, M & L. Ravelli (eds.) (1992). Advances in Systemic Linguistics: Recent Theory and Practice. London: Pinter; pp. 5-19;
Sinclair, J. M. (1996). "The Empty Lexicon", International Journal of Corpus Linguistics. Vol. 1 (1): 99-119.

[6] Stubbs, Michael (1996). *Text and Corpus Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell.

This categorical division between grammar and pragmatics has predominated the literature on language pathologies for decades. However, since the 90s, this separation has been questioned for various reasons:

1. Neuro-imaging studies: enable observation of how the right cerebral hemisphere is activated during very different linguistic tasks, such as naming, verbal routines, etc., and particularly categories of pragmatic integration, such as interpreting idioms, prosodic focusing processes, etc. The left-sidedness of language is thus questioned, since many tasks require the participation of the other hemisphere.
2. Studies on patients with right hemisphere damage show that their linguistic capacity is not preserved intact, as was thought; Yves Joanette and Ana Inés Ansaldo specifically identify a "pragmatic aphasia", which should be studied "*in order to describe the clinical condition of those individuals suffering from acquired pragmatic disorders*" (Joanette and Ansaldo, 1999: 529)[7] in right-handed people with right hemisphere damage. The authors state that "*pragmatic skills are as inherent to language as lexical or morphosyntactic skills*" (1999: 533). Other authors describe a "right hemisphere syndrome".
3. The discussion on isolating or agglutinative languages forces a rethinking of the attribution of grammar to the left hemisphere:
    a. The speaker/listener of an isolating language (such as Vietnamese or Chinese), needs to activate the right hemisphere to code/decode the prosodic aspects that establish lexical meaning. It should be remembered, alongside *flexive* or *fusional* languages (Spanish, English, German, French, Catalan, etc.) that linguistic typology recognises two other basic types.
    b. In *isolating* languages, words are monosyllabic and grammatical functions are coded according to specific word and particle order; tonal changes in each word (in each syllable) alter its lexical meaning: depending on the tone in which it is said, the syllable /ma/ can have such different meanings as "horse", "mother", "quarrel" and "hemp" (this is in a Chinese language with only four tones; there are more).



[7] Joanette, Yves and Ansaldo, Ana Inés (1999): "Clinical Note: Acquired Pragmatic Impairments and Aphasia", *Brain and Language,* 68, 3, July, 529-534.

c. In contrast, *agglutinative* languages form words by adding word units that have a reciprocal relationship with its morphemes (there is no desinence that fuses more than one morpheme, as is the case with the word unit "-o" of "cant-o", where there is a confluence of the first person, singular number, present tense, indicative mode morphemes; in agglutinative languages each morpheme has its own word unit).

d. In African tonal languages the tone is needed in order to code/decode certain grammatical morphemes (non-lexical);

e. Fusional languages, such as European languages, use tone for marking out informative aspects of an utterance, so the **dysprosodia** produced by some right-hemisphere lesions not only affects emotional aspects, as stated in the literature, but also those that are strictly linguistic.

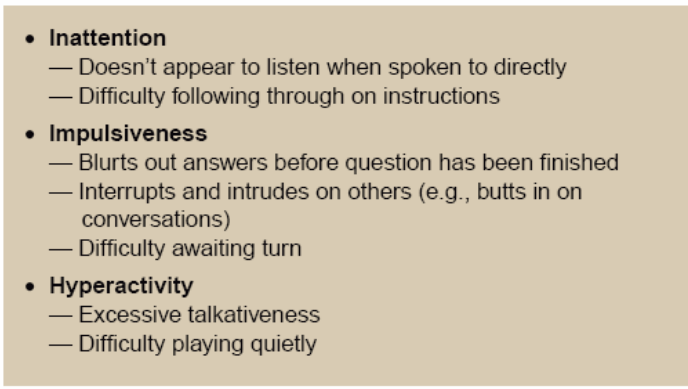
f. Neuro-imaging is also important for observing reading processes in languages that only write the consonants of each word and are read from right to left (Semitic languages such as Arabic or Hebrew) or that use ideographical, non-alphabetical systems (the *hanzis* in Chinese languages).

In summary, the concept of language must be a global one including aspects of grammar together with those of pragmatic use. This avoids reductionisms such as those that lead to statements denying the existence of "language problems" in pathological situations such as right hemisphere lesions, attention deficit and/hyperactivity disorders, etc.

For example, the following text by Rosemary Tannock makes these type of statements but contextualises them properly insofar as it speaks about the "computational system" of language, referring to grammar. It is well-known that the definition of ADHD is made using conversational pragmatic factors, such as thematic management, turn taking, etc., and therefore the idea of speakers with ADHD whose everyday language "does not exhibit any language or communication problems" is unthinkable.

> Paradoxically, although the psychiatric diagnostic classification of "Communication Disorders" implies a focus on language as a social communicative system, clinical/medical investigations rely almost exclusively on standardized language tests purported to measure the abstract linguistic computational system. Epidemiological studies suggest that 30% to 50% of children with ADHD are impaired in receptive and/or expressive components of the linguistic computational system, with the implication being that the remaining children with ADHD do not exhibit any language or communication problems.[11] Conversely, about 60% of children in kindergarten who manifest specific speech and language impairments (communication disorders) also meet diagnostic criteria for ADHD.[12]

The above fragment by R. Tannock comes from the text "Language and Mental Health Disorders", which can be consulted online. The same author groups together the language-related aspects used in DSM-IV for diagnosing ADHD in the following table:



- **Inattention**
  - — Doesn't appear to listen when spoken to directly
  - — Difficulty following through on instructions
- **Impulsiveness**
  - — Blurts out answers before question has been finished
  - — Interrupts and intrudes on others (e.g., butts in on conversations)
  - — Difficulty awaiting turn
- **Hyperactivity**
  - — Excessive talkativeness
  - — Difficulty playing quietly

Figure 2. A subset of the 18 possible diagnostic symptoms of ADHD that are indicative of language or communication problems.

By Salvador Gutiérrez (1996): *Presentación de la pragmática (Presentation of Pragmatics),* León: Universidad, p. 17-19.

"Let us imagine a case. A Basque businessman returns from holiday. There is a message on his answer phone: 'Mr. Iruña, this is Antxon. We'll be meeting in two days' time'.

The businessman, like anyone who knows our language, can decipher the literal content or *linguistic meaning* of the message. P. F. Strawson called it *signified-A*. The code enables the interpretation. It has the property of being constant, fixed and, in the absence of ambiguity, it always has the same meaning for users of the same language. It is not affected by changes of speaker, situation, etc. But is it sufficient for him?

Not at all. If he wants to get all the information transmitted by this message, he needs to know who out of the many people he knows by the name of Antxon is the one who left the message. As he does not know what time the call was made (act of enunciation) he is unable to identify the exact moment referred to in the expression *in two days' time*. This is *signified-B* or *referential* meaning. This content value is needed but it is not constant. It depends on the circumstances of the enunciation.

Our businessman still has more questions: 'What did he mean by saying he'd see me in two days' time? Is it a terrorist threat? Is it a customer? Is it a friend who wants to give me some good news?' This is *signified-C* or *intentional meaning*.

(...) The job of linguistics is to describe *signified-A*, which is normally known as the *literal sense*. Pragmatics explains the referential and intentional meanings. There is a difference of field between Linguistics and Pragmatics. The first studies messages exclusively from its code, from its formal competence. The second interprets utterances, taking into account all the elements that intervene in the communication circuit: *speaker, receiver, channel, circumstances*, etc. and, of course, the *code*".