

Ever Since Dennett: On the Origins of Biolinguistics

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In their ‘*Biolinguistics Manifesto*’, Boeckx & Grohmann (2007: 3) rightly point out “that the recent resurgence of interest in ‘biolinguistics’ is due in large part to the advent of the minimalist program in linguistic theory”. Various reasons have been given for the necessity of moving from (some kind of) GB-style grammar research toward minimalism, some more conceptual (cf. e.g. Chomsky 2007: 19), some more empirical (cf. e.g. Holmberg 2000). However, arguably one of the motivating sources neglected so far is a remark by Daniel Dennett, which this very brief note is meant to bring to everyone’s attention (again).

In reflecting upon the explanatory burden put on UG by Chomsky (1980b, 1980c), Dennett gives vent to an uneasy feeling about “passing the buck to biology”. He therefore — constructively, I believe (cf. Dennett 1995: 388) — “challenges Chomsky” as follows:

Perhaps no one supposes there is a larger innate contribution than Chomsky does, and perhaps the facts will eventually bear out a position close to his, but his polemics sometimes ignore the perfectly reasonable motivation behind the contrary perspective — what we might call the *minimalist* research strategy. (Dennett 1980: 19)

Given the context of the early GB era, Chomsky (1980a: 44) defended his position as the most promising way of “developing what Dennett calls a ‘realistic picture’ of the basis in innate endowment for cognitive growth”. Thirty years on, however, it seems that some credit is due to the challenger. Thus, ironically, although Dennett’s (neo-)Darwinian adaptationist outlook may be considered incompatible with (certain strands of) biolinguistics (cf. Hinzen 2006), his visionary postulation of a “minimalist research strategy” could well be taken to have contributed a pebble — be it ever so small — to the biolinguistic edifice. *Honni soit qui mal y pense.*

References

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