

LAD Conferences

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L a b o r a t o i r e d e r e c h e r c h e s u r l e s a s y m é t r i e s d ' i n t e r f a c e s

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Biolinguistics: Perspectives on Symmetry

Biolinguistics is the study of the biology of language, but what is language? Current research posits a faculty of language and investigates to what extent this faculty of language has properties in common with other species (faculty of language in the broad sense) and to what extent has properties that might be unique (faculty of language in the narrow sense). This faculty of language can then be studied from the traditional points of view of the biological sciences: what is the structure and function of this faculty of language, how does it develop in the child (ontogeny) and how does it evolve in the species (phylogeny).

At some point questions of language design appear. Chomsky notes that the language faculty arises from an interaction of 1) genetic endowment, 2) the environment and 3) principles not specific to the faculty of language. He notes that principles of efficient computation might be an example of factor 3. Factor 3 principles might even be non-domain-specific and non-organism-specific.

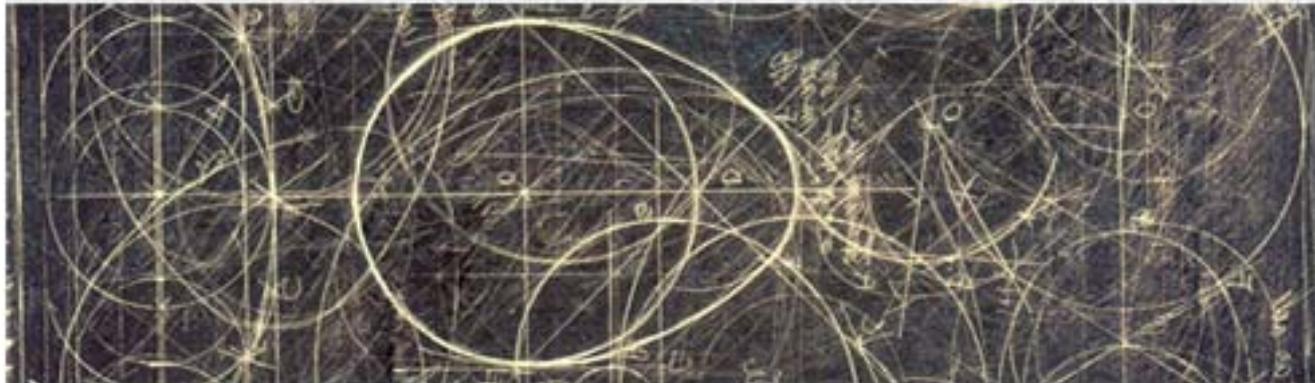
We would like to ask to what extent symmetry might be another example of a factor 3 principle. It is non-domain specific: e.g., it is applicable to syntax, morphology and phonology, etc. within the faculty of language. At the same time it is applicable in other non-language domains; e.g., vision and music. It is non-organism-specific; e.g., it is applicable to the neural circuits of both humans and birds. Finally, symmetry has a number of other interesting properties: it unifies, restricts, guides, predicts, is portable and is hidden.

Jenkins studied problems in theoretical syntax (modality and the existential construction) at M.I.T. under Noam Chomsky within the Extended Standard Theory, one of the first theories of generative grammar to address the study of language from a biolinguistic perspective. Jenkins then taught at a number of universities, including the University of Vienna, the University of Salzburg, and the University of Paris VIII (Vincennes). At Salzburg he helped to organize the Linguistic Society of America's (LSA), Summer Institute on the biology of language, which included the participation of Konrad Lorenz and other biologists. While a Visiting Fellow at the Department of Biological Chemistry, Harvard University, Jenkins worked on the SV-40 monkey virus. Together with Allan Maxam, who (with Walter Gilbert) had developed the chemical method of DNA sequencing and done pioneering work in the area of immunology, Jenkins organized the Harvard Biolinguistics Group at the Harvard Medical School and later the Biolinguistics Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to promote interdisciplinary work in the field of biolinguistics.

Selected Publications

- Jenkins, Lyle. 2000. *Biolinguistics: Exploring the Biology of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP
- Jenkins, Lyle. (2004). *Unification in Biolinguistics. Variation and Universals in Biolinguistics*. L. Jenkins (ed.). Amsterdam, Elsevier: 317-339.
- Jenkins, Lyle. (2006). *Explanation in Biolinguistics*. Linguistic Variation Yearbook 6. John Benjamins Publishing Company: 3-26.
- Jenkins, Lyle. (forthcoming). *Biolinguistic Investigations: Genetics and Dynamics. Biolinguistic Investigations*. A. Di Sciullo (ed.). Cambridge: MIT Press.

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