An Investigation into the Existence of the Faculty of Language*

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1. Introduction

Chomsky (1998) makes an assumption that "the faculty of language," is innately given in our mind/brain, dedicated to human language[1]. Furthermore, Chomsky (2001a) claims that the ultimate purpose of "Minimalist Program" is identifying the characteristics of "the initial state of the faculty of language[2]. This approach to "the study of language that takes the object of inquiry to be an internal property of persons" is a controversial issue, but it has never changed since it was inaugurated over the past few decades[3].

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the advantages that derive from the assumption that the faculty of language exists in our mind/brain. More specifically, I would like to elucidate what profits we would get by keeping in mind the existence of the faculty of language. The rest of this essay is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a pseudo fundamental problem in generative grammarians' assumption that the faculty of language exists in our mind/brain. Section 3 highlights straightforwardly the advantages of supposing that the faculty of language is biologically given in the human mind/brain. Finally, section 4 summarizes the discussion.

2. Is the existence of the faculty of language justified?

In this section I will raise a basic problem in generative grammar. Every generative grammarian, along the line of Chomsky (1965) and his subsequent works, takes it for granted that the faculty of language exists in our mind/brain. However, does it really exist? Has anyone found it? In other words, is the existence of the faculty of language justified? The answer to this question is categorically negative: as far as I am concerned, brain scientists have never reported that they had recognized the faculty of language or "a grammar gene," if such a thing would exist[4]. It is probably quite impossible to cut the Gordian knot at the current level of understanding. Hopefully, then, the purpose of this essay would be to argue for convincing and

indisputable evidence for the existence of the faculty of language. This is, however, not the right thing that linguists can do for two reasons. Firstly, this is because it is not at all a good idea to try to investigate the functions of the brain by cutting someone's head into slices to identify the faculty of language in the human mind/brain. It is over my head. In addition, technically speaking, it is not obvious whether it is possible to do so or not. Secondly, asking a question like *Is the existence of the faculty of language justified?* would be precipitate: it is not appropriate at the contemporary level of understanding what is happening in our mind/brain when we acquire a native language. Therefore, the next best thing linguists can do is to explain why it is reasonable to suppose that the faculty of language exists in our mind/brain. What profits do linguists get by keeping the existence of the faculty of language in mind/brain? The following section will try to give the answer to the question.

3. The advantage of supposing that the faculty of language is innately given in our mind/brain.

Generative grammar has been developed not as a theory but as a program to characterize the knowledge of a native speaker about his/her natural language as a formal and explicit system, which generates all and only the representations that underlie the grammatical sentences in a natural language. Therefore, it is primarily concerned with the idea that the faculty of language governs the syntactic structures and semantic interpretations of the natural language. It is considered to be a specific component of the human mind/brain that gives "knowledge of language." More specifically, it is assumed to be a biologically endowed part of the human mind/brain devoted specifically to language.

There are at least three reasons why it is reasonable to suppose the existence of the faculty of language. Let us begin by considering the next examples.

(1) a. [John expected to visit him]
      b. I wonder who [John expected to visit him]

(Chomsky 1987:7)

The brackets show that each sentence incorporates the complement, which appears to be exactly the same on the surface at least.   In (1a), the pronoun *him* does not refer to *John* but someone else.   In (1b), on the other hand, the meaning changes: the pronoun *him* may refer to *John.*

   Moreover, consider the following data.

(2)   a.   sensei-2-ri-ga   jusho-o   otta   (koto)[5]
            teachers-2-CL-NOM bad-wound-ACC got
            'Two teachers got a fatal wound.'

      b. *sensei   jusho-o   2-ri-ga   otta   (koto)
            teachers   bad-wound-ACC 2-CL-NOM got
            'Two teachers got a fatal wound.'

      c.   jusho-o   sensei-2-ri-ga   otta   (koto)
            bad-wound-ACC teachers-2-CL-NOM got
            'Two teachers got a fatal wound.'

      d. *jusho-o   2-ri-ga   sensei   otta   (koto)
            bad-wound-ACC 2-CL-NOM teachers got
            'Two teachers got a fatal wound.'

      e. *2-ri-ga   sensei   jusho-o   otta   (koto)
            2-CL-NOM teachers bad-wound-ACC got
            'Two teachers got a fatal wound.'

      f. *2-ri-ga   jusho-o   sensei   otta   (koto)
            2-CL-NOM bad-wound-ACC teachers got
            'Two teachers got a fatal wound.'

                              (The data are adapted from Hatakeyama 2002: 11-12)

Both (2a) and (2c) are grammatical: a native speaker of Japanese never says (2b), (2d), (2e), or (2f).   Why do Japanese native speakers recognize and produce only (2a) and (2c), though there is a one-third probability that they will use them in these examples.   In other words, how can we explain these empirical facts?

   One might easily imagine that it is not at all crystal clear what our "knowledge of language" implies in these cases[6].   It follows from these examples, however, that the native speakers of English or Japanese do know

these facts unconsciously and without any pertinent responses from "speech community."[7]   In other words, it is quite obvious that they have never heard or read these examples before.   Nevertheless, they know these facts: for example, who the pronoun refers to in (1) and which expressions are grammatical in (2).   It is completely reasonable to assume, therefore, that the faculty of language exists in our mind/brain and that it enables us to make judgments about references to pronouns or grammaticality of the sentences. This is one reason why it is legitimate to assume that the faculty of language exits in our mind/brain. Furthermore, it is well known that children learn their own language more naturally and earlier than we expected.   How can children know as much as they do about their native language, though the opportunities they make contact with the outer world are so limited?   More specifically, how can they know about the facts mentioned above and acquire his/her own language with few chances confronting such expressions like (1) or (2)?   If we assume that the faculty of language exists in our mind/brain, then the assumption is consistent with the facts I have already mentioned above.   This is the other good reason for the existing of the faculty of language.

Lastly, in these respects, it is significant to note that if there is a rather complicated thing that is unknown at the contemporary level of understanding, then it is rational to assume that it really exists and continue to consider what we could say at the moment and pending further inquiries. These are remarkable profit to be found by postulating that the faculty of language has already provided intrinsically as well.

4. Conclusion

This essay concerns explaining what profits we would get by keeping the existence of the faculty of language in our mind/brain.   In section 2, I raised an apparent problem of generative grammar: is the existence of the faculty of language warranted?   Then I claimed that this is not the question that linguists have to deal with for two reasons: it is because it is inappropriate to investigate the functions of the brain and because it is more legitimate to assume that the faculty of language exits and think what the advantages of assuming so are.   The section 3 dealt with the two advantages of positing the

existence of the faculty of language.　If we suppose so, then we can explain why we know the facts without learning beforehand and why children can acquire their own languages without much data available.

　　It might be premature to conclude that the faculty of language exists in our mind/brain.　It is crucial, however, that intriguing facts based on syntactic and semantic phenomena can be explained if and only of we assume that we have the faculty of language in our mind/brain as we have seen in the last section.　In short, the autonomous faculty of language is syntactically and semantically motivated.　Moreover, it would also be fruitful to assume that the unknown at the time exists and continue to study it further when a certain degree of explanatory adequacy of the assumption is at stake.　These are great and definite advantages in supposing that the faculty of language exists in the human mind/brain.　Whether the overall argument of this paper is basically on the right track or not remains to be seen in future research.

Notes

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1.　See Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch (2010: 17) for the definition of "the faculty of language in the narrow sense."　I will pursue this important topic in the near future.

2.　See Chomsky (2001a: 14).

3.　See Chomsky (2001a: 21).

4.　On this matter, see Pinker (1994: 304) for more detailed discussion. Moreover, Pinker (1994) refers to Broca's deduction that the faculty of language remains in the left side of the brain.　However, I will not pursue this important topic here.

5.　See Chomsky (2002: 5).

6.　*Koto* 'the fact that' (in parentheses) is added at the end of the examples, along the line of Fukui (1993), Koizumi (1995, 2000) and others.

7.　See Chomsky (2002: 5)

8.　See Chomsky (1987: 14)

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