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## Theory, Data, and the Epistemology of Syntax

Geoffrey K. Pullum (Edinburgh)

Linguists have explored extreme positions on universalism vs. parochialism, empiricism vs. nativism, grammar-drills vs. immersion-learning, and other issues. The methodology of syntax has likewise veered between two implausible dogmatic extremes: **corpus fetishism**, which claims that only corpus of attested utterances is our only evidence and thus implies that everything attested must be accounted for by our theories, and **idiolectal solipsism**, which presumes that our unobservable intuitive feelings about sentences are the only real data and facts about actual usage can be largely disregarded. (Vulgar analogues of these views are familiar from popular discussions of the prescriptive and descriptive grammar: I have called them the 'everything-is-correct' and 'nothing-is-relevant' views.) I sketch a methodology and epistemology for syntax that follows neither. Departing from the views most current linguists on syntactic theory and the nature of our subject matter, I hold that we are modelling neither external facts of utterance production nor internal and inaccessible functioning of mental machinery; rather, syntax has a **normative** subject matter. Our object of study is a tacit system of constraints defining neither acoustic nor neurophysiological events but rather **correctness** of structure. This view is dismissed equally by extreme corpus-bound empiricists (e.g. Geoffrey Sampson) and extreme intuition-favouring mentalists (e.g. Noam Chomsky). But I argue that parallel between syntactic systems and moral systems is in fact strong and interesting, once we allow for the one central difference: the empirical dimension introduced by the fact that linguistic systems are of many quite different kinds whereas morality is universal. The relevant epistemology for clarifying and justifying normative systems on the basis of particular facts and judgments was sketched long ago by (Chomsky's former teacher) Nelson Goodman, and applied most notably by John Rawls. It is known as the method of reflective equilibrium.