

Till the cows come home: a note on post-anthropocene linguistics

Jan-Wouter Zwart

Leonie Cornips in a recent paper (Cornips 2019:13) asks “why in (socio)linguistics we draw an a-priori distinction, claimed to be universal, between humans and other animals as language users”. Following Meijer (2017), Cornips traces the answer back to Book I of Aristotle’s *Politics* (ca. 350 BCE), where reasoning (*logos*) is argued to be possessed by humans only; other animals can at most utter sound (*phonè*). This distinction, Cornips argues, defines language a-priori as human language, and wonders (*ibid.*): “Could we get a better understanding of language by not restricting it to humans?”.

Linguistics is a vast field of research with a tradition that spans many centuries. In addition, the past decades have seen an increased amount of specialization within this field, spawning a range of subdisciplines, which differ considerably as to their methodology and object of investigation. I can speak with a certain amount of confidence only about one or two of these, centering around theoretical linguistics, and more particularly generative syntactic theory. However, this is probably as good a place as any to start considering the questions posed by Cornips (2019).

Theoretical linguistics entered its most recent stage around 1950, when Chomsky observed that (as he later wrote) “the central fact to which any linguistic theory must address itself is this: a mature speaker can produce a new sentence of his language on the appropriate occasion, and other speakers can understand it immediately, though it is equally new to them” (1964:7), identifying the faculty of language underlying this competence as the object of inquiry for linguistics. Chomsky concluded, correctly, that the phenomenon of linguistic creativity can be explained by modeling this linguistic competence as a generative system.

Importantly, the research that derives from this viewpoint has nothing to say about communication, or language use more generally. In fact, even language itself (i.e. the infinite set of sentences of any or all languages, what Chomsky calls ‘E-language’), ceases to be the object of inquiry for linguistics, yielding to the *faculty* of language (or ‘I-language’) instead.

We now have to ask the question whether Chomsky’s definition of the object of inquiry of linguistics (the human faculty of language) involves an a-priori distinction between humans and other animals, as Cornips alleges. I am assuming that Cornips uses the term ‘a-priori’ here in the nontechnical sense of ‘conceived beforehand’. So the question becomes: is it necessarily the case that, to move from the observation that speakers can produce and interpret new sentences to the identification of the human language faculty as the object of inquiry in linguistics, we must have conceived beforehand that there is a distinction between humans and other animals? And clearly, this is not the case.

Consider, for example, a parallel case, where we observe that humans can juggle a ball or hit it out of a ballpark using a wooden bat, and develop from that a research interest in the human faculty responsible for the motor agility and hand-eye coordination required for these feats. This is a valid research question that can exist without preconceived notions about humans and other animals in this domain.

I think, therefore, that Cornips’ premiss is wrong: linguistics, even where it is admittedly restricted to the study of the human language faculty, is not the result of an a-priori

distinction drawn between humans and other animals. The current research questions are shaped by the observation of certain natural phenomena (in this case, the ability to produce and interpret new sentences), which are found only in humans. This makes Cornips' further question ("Could we get a better understanding of language by not restricting it to humans?") meaningless, unless it can be shown that the relevant phenomena can also be observed in other animals.

There is no logical reason for not expanding linguistic research to a more encompassing concept of the faculty of language, with the objective of capturing behavior that is also attested in other animals. This possibility is anticipated in Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch (2002), where they make a distinction between a faculty of language in the broad (FLB) and in the narrow (FLN) sense, and suggest that FLN is restricted to the capacity of recursive structure building, the core element of any generative system. But at this point there is no indication that such a move would have any explanatory benefits.

The identification of the faculty of language as the object of inquiry in linguistics has led to a vastly increased understanding of the phenomena of language (E-language) themselves, particularly in charting the range of possible linguistic variation. In fact, Cornips has contributed admirably to this effort by identifying the properties of middle constructions in the Heerlen Dutch contact language (Cornips 1994, 1996). It is not immediately clear how including nonhuman animal communication data could improve the quality of the insights already obtained in this domain.

Variation is also at the core of another subdiscipline explicitly mentioned by Cornips, sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics matches linguistic variation to sociological variables (such as age, income, gender, etc.) as a tool to chart social stratification and, possibly, development. Like theoretical linguistics, it starts from empirical observation of natural language phenomena in humans (e.g. Labov 1963:273), and therefore the opprobrium that it draws an a-priori distinction between humans and other animals applies just as little as to theoretical linguistics. The linguistic observations may be very subtle, and matching them with sociological variables is not always straightforward, as Labov's (1963) study of centralization in Martha's Vinyard shows. But to include observations on nonhuman animal life would require evidence of the same linguistic and sociological variables, and failure to expand the scope of the research in the absence of such evidence does not constitute bias.

Sociolinguistics has also increased our understanding of language change, both as a function of variation existing within a speech community, and as the result of language contact. The former (change as a function of variation) requires an analysis of the change over time of the status of varieties in particular situations, not a trivial matter. The latter (change as the result of language contact) requires a distinction between amicable, prolonged language contact leading to borrowing, and forced, sudden language contact leading to language shift with substratum permanence (essentially mixing the vocabulary of the target language with the grammar of the source language) (Thomason and Kaufman 1988). In all these situations it is essential to distinguish varieties, register, and linguistic elements, both at a given moment and over time. Again, it is not a-priori excluded that animal or inter species communication could contribute comparable and valuable data to the research. But at this point I know of no evidence to suggest that such data could even remotely approach the level of sophistication needed to be of any relevance.

It is all the more important, therefore, to listen to the arguments advanced by Cornips that "human relations and interactions with other animals and/or animal languages should

be on the sociolinguistic research agenda” (2019:15). That argument, it turns out, is that there are just *a lot* of animals (an estimated 33 million companion animals and 125 million farm animals, at 17 million human inhabitants of the Netherlands), and that humans *do* interact with these animals. — Undoubtedly. We will just have to wait for sustained observations of the type made by Chomsky and Labov, that may inform a research agenda. What is not clear is that these observations and the ensuing research will have any bearing on linguistics as we know it.

References

- Chomsky, Noam. 1964. Goals of linguistic theory. In *Current issues in linguistic theory*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Cornips, Leonie. 1994. *Syntactische variatie in het Algemeen Nederlands van Heerlen*. PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam.
- Cornips, Leonie. 1996. The spread of the reflexive adjunct middle in the Limburg dialects 1885-1994. *Linguistics in the Netherlands 1996*, 49-60.
- Cornips, Leonie. 2019. The final frontier: non-human animals on the linguistic research agenda. *Linguistics in the Netherlands 2019*, 13-19.
- Hauser, Mark, Noam Chomsky, and W. Tecumseh Fitch. 2002. The Faculty of Language: what is it, who has it, and how did it evolve? *Science* 298, 1569-1579.
- Labov, William. 1963. The social motivation of a sound change. *Word* 19, 273-309.
- Meijer, Eva. 2017. *Political animal voices*. PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam.
- Thomason, Sarah G. and Terrence Kaufman. 1988. *Language contact, creolization and genetic linguistics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

April 11, 2020