

10. GLOW Tenth Anniversary

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The founding of GLOW ten years ago came at a period of significant reevaluation and changes of perspective in the study of language, changes to which GLOW and those associated with it have made decisive contributions and which, in my judgment at least, represent a notable and perhaps dramatic turning point in the recent history of linguistics.

The new directions of the past decade were not, of course, initiated at one moment of time. Rather, a number of developments of earlier years began to crystallize and come together, in a mutually reinforcing manner, to yield a conception of the nature of language that is markedly different from anything that came before. In my personal experience at least, there is nothing comparable to the progress in understanding that has been achieved in the past decade and the intellectual excitement it has engendered within the discipline, and I suspect that history may record a similar judgment, and one less restricted in temporal scope, when this period is placed in proper perspective.

During these years, there has been a real explosion in the range of materials from a wide variety of typologically different languages that have come to be understood to some significant degree in a systematic way, and that must ultimately be taken into account by any conception of the nature of language. Furthermore, the range of topics that have come under intensive investigation has considerably broadened, and more important, this broadening of scope has been accompanied by a qualitative increase in the depth of explanation realistically sought and sometimes approached or attained. The field has become far more difficult, in just the right way. There is more to know, but more significant, there is more to understand, both within the domains of general linguistic theory -- to keep abreast of the literature on crossover or ECP or a dozen other topics is no small task -- and in its application to a variety of languages.

We might, I think, perceive the essential core of the change in perspective that has taken place in the following terms. Traditional work in grammar dealt primarily with properties of language that are language-particular and construction-particular: the passive construction in English, the relative clause construction in French, and so on. Generative grammar followed the same mode of thought, attempting to formulate explicit rules for particular constructions in particular languages. The same grammatical construction -- passives, relatives, etc. -- might appear in different languages, in different forms. It was always understood that some of the properties of such rules and the constructions they sought to clarify are not language-particular, but rather belong to the language faculty itself, constituting the domain of universal grammar, and that some general properties could also be abstracted from a variety of constructions: binary opposition, hierarchic structure, and so on. But the general focus of attention was language-particular and construction-particular rules.

Recognition of the flaws in this conception and efforts to overcome them date from the early 1960s, setting much of the research agenda for the years that followed. Much current work approaches these questions in quite a different way. Human language consists of systems of universal principles, and what is language-particular, in large measure, is not a

specific choice of rules but rather a specific choice of options that the general principles of the language faculty leave undetermined, within a narrow range: the parameters of variation. The constructions of traditional grammar and early generative grammar dissolve and disappear; they are artifacts, with no real status in the structure of language, on a par with such categories as terrestrial animal or large organism. The collection of phenomena grouped under some construction are determined and explained by the interaction of fixed and universal principles, with a language-particular choice of parameters; there are few, if any, language-particular rules, at least for a properly idealized concept of human language to which the complex systems attained in the course of individual experience approximate. The concept of "grammatical construction" effectively disappears, and the nature of what is language-particular and language-universal is quite differently conceived as languages are taken to be "rule-free systems," constituted of invariant principles of the language faculty with language-specific choices of values for parameters.

The principles of language determine the kinds of representations formed by the language faculty of the mind and the ways they are interrelated, once the options left undetermined by universal grammar are set by experience. In principle, we should be able literally to deduce the properties of particular (idealized) languages from a specific choice of these options. These possibilities are, of course, far from being realized, but the problem can now be formulated and realistically addressed, in some domains at least, for the first time. The partial successes have sometimes been impressive and highly encouraging, and the many failures are often illuminating in that the current level of understanding allows them to be useful guides for productive inquiry. The break with the tradition is in some respects more sharp than was true of the rise of early generative grammar, which often recast traditional insights in novel terms, though within a rather different general framework, guided by different goals. In contrast, the underlying conception of the nature of language that has developed in recent work is itself quite novel. Its implications for the study of language typology and language change, acquisition and use of language, pathology and other questions of psychology of language and perhaps -- some day -- the physical basis for knowledge of language and its growth and use, are only beginning to be explored in very suggestive recent work.

The annual GLOW meetings have served as a central intellectual impetus for research during this period, a source of rich stimulation and exciting progress. The publications that have resulted from these presentations and interchanges constitute a record of rare distinction. Thanks in large measure to the record of accomplishment associated with GLOW and its organizers and participants, there are good grounds to look forward to the coming years with a real sense of anticipation and confidence in continuing and solid progress. Those who founded the organization and have kept it flourishing through these years merit sincere congratulations for this achievement.