



Poverty of Stimulus: Unfinished Business*

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What I would like to do is to make a few remarks about the conceptual foundations of much linguistic work, and much contemporary work, and also on some interesting, and sometimes far-reaching consequences, that I don't think receive sufficient attention. And as a kind of paradigm example for research, I will turn to one of the simplest of the enumerable poverty of stimulus problems that immediately came to light as this approach to language began to take shape in the early 1950s. A very simple solution was suggested at the time. I think it is basically correct, but some fundamental inadequacies have been overlooked right to the present, and investigation of these opens up some rather difficult problems that are right at the borders of inquiry today. That's the specific example of unfinished business that I intended in the title. But it is important to emphasize that what is unfinished or barely even contemplated goes vastly beyond.

There are many ways to study language. There's one way that has a certain logical priority in the sense that every approach to language presupposes its conclusions, tacitly at least. That includes approaches that vigorously deny doing so. That's the study of the linguistic capacity of the user of language. Every other approach must be based on assumptions about these capacities, and they're usually tacit. That's true whether it's the study of the use of language in social interchange, or historical and comparative studies, or for that matter even something as simple as transcribing a corpus of material. Such assumptions are buried in somewhere. Thinking of language this way, it is an internal property of an individual, so sometimes these days called "I-language".

Uncontroversially, I-language at its core is a system of discrete infinity like the natural numbers, and any approach to language that doesn't deal with that fact is missing a core feature of language. The study of I-language is based on some method for characterizing an infinite discrete set of structured expressions. The

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