

Artificial language and linguistic theory

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Most linguists consider themselves students of a phenomenon that belongs to the natural world: many textbooks start by explaining that the object of study is 'natural language'. There may be some discussion as to where in the natural world the object resides (is it an innate mental organ? Does it emerge spontaneously in natural interaction between agents? etc.), but there is little disagreement as to the desirability of the general point of view.

In recent years, there are some slow changes, mostly coming from experimental work. If one studies the human language capacity, itself presumably part of the natural world, one can of course in principle study how this capacity reacts to non-natural work. The paradigm case of 'unnatural' language in such work is of course the Wug test, but nowadays we see examples of rather complicated 'artificial languages' being offered to participants of experiments.

In this presentation, I discuss what are the problems with dealing with artificial language material for linguists and then proceed to argue that such material actually gives us a unique window into human language. I discuss three seemingly diverse case studies. First, I show how Dutch poets in the 16th Century adapted French and Italian poetic forms to suit their poetic and linguistic needs. This shows how seemingly conscious decisions lead to a result that fits our expectations about natural language prosody. Secondly, I discuss results about language acquisition in children learning Esperanto, demonstrating how 'artificial' input leads to results that are indistinguishable from that of children learning natural languages. And thirdly, I discuss a case of 'polarisation' in Dutch dialects, showing how even in varieties of language that traditionally were considered most 'purely natural' of all, conscious decision seems to have played a role.