

Pius ten Hacken: *Chomskyan Linguistics and its Competitors*.
London / Oakville: Equinox, 2009.

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The best way to introduce the purpose and scope of this book is to imagine for a moment oneself as a student once more. In the course of my own studies I arrived at a point where the plurality of proposals in the theory of grammar began to appear unmanageable and I am sure I am not alone in this. I realized that Chomskyan “generativism” was (is?) the leading paradigm in the field but that it was not without serious challengers: those originating from his own camp, e.g., Lexical Functional Grammar, Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar and Jackendoff (among others), who all set themselves apart from “orthodox” generative linguistics at some stage in its development; and furthermore Cognitive Grammar, Role and Reference Grammar, and Construction Grammar (among others), who shared some more fundamental disagreements with respect to Generative Grammar. The differences were quite subtle and I wondered whether one could draw definite dividing lines between “Chomskyan” generative linguistics and each of LFG, HPSG and Jackendoff, and whether these lines would be somehow different from those between Chomskyan linguistics and CG, RRG and CxG. What are the criteria according to which the lines should be drawn? Is there a way to evaluate different approaches?

These are the problems and questions ten Hacken’s survey of “Chomskyan Linguistics and its Competitors” deals with. The reference point for the presentation and comparison is “Chomskyan linguistics”, i.e., the kind of engagement with linguistics whose methodological grounds were set out by Chomsky but is not dependent on and restricted to the person of Noam Chomsky, but rather to his “research programme”. The rationale for putting Chomskyan linguistics at the centre is simply the fact that its research programme is the best explicated and can therefore serve well as a reference.

The presentation is divided into five chapters. In the first, dealing with the philosophy of science, the term “research programme” is introduced, i.e., the metatheoretical grounds on which to talk about theories. The chapter is thus meta-metatheoretical: it concerns the question of how to talk about theories that are about theories. The starting point is Kuhn’s (1975) theory of scientific progress. Scientific progress is made possible by the workings of the empirical cycle. By means of examples from astronomy and illustrative schematics, ten Hacken shows how it works. Different kinds of observations of data lead to the formulation of theories capturing these data by finding some systematic order in them. Strictly speaking, the empirical cycle is not a cycle but a spiral. Observations need not necessarily be pre-theoretic but may rely on already existing theories. A theory capturing the data observed also makes predictions about data yet to be observed, which may give rise to new observations, which, in turn, result in a modified theory, which makes predictions about other data to be observed ...

However, the fact that the empirical cycle is so widely accepted is in sharp contrast to its obvious problems. Which of all potential observations should count as data? Which aspects of