

Theory or No Theory? The role of data in linguistics

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This talk will address the following questions: (1) What is linguistics a theory of?, and (2) What is the role of data in establishing that theory?

There are two extreme kinds of science. On the one hand we have physics, where the research aims to establish a few universal principles, and masses of data are needed to establish them with the required certainty. On the other we have the humanities, where almost no universal laws exist, and all research can do is to answer more and more detailed questions. For a brief period of time it was believed that linguistics is more like physics, and the role of research was to uncover the hidden laws of language structure. This research program is known as the Chomskyan turn in linguistics. This talk will discuss the successes and failures of this project as well as the underlying assumptions. This may help in understanding better the role of data in linguistic theory formation.