

Infinity, recursion, and the universal properties of human language

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[This talk reports joint research with Barbara C. Scholz.]

A number of linguists have claimed that the infinitude of the set of all grammatical expressions is a key substantive property of human languages, intimately bound up with important facts about human cognition. The arguments they offer are flawed whether construed as inductive or as deductive. The link to recursion as a fundamental feature of human thought and communicational abilities is similarly misconceived, and does not support infinitude anyway. I discuss three factors that may be involved in encouraging an unwarranted reverence for infinitude: (1) an unmotivated conceptual hangover concerning languages as sets, (2) a false impression created by early generative linguists' anti-associationist rhetoric; and (3) the widespread belief that infinitude has some importance in accounting for linguistic creativity (it doesn't). Crucially, I point out that formalised descriptions of human languages can in fact be given in terms that neither entail infinitude nor deny it. This entirely defuses one aspect of a supposedly related recent controversy concerning apparently subordination-free languages of Amazonia.