

RESPONDING TO A HATCHET JOB LUDLOW'S REVIEW OF IGNORANCE OF LANGUAGE

RESPUESTA A UNA CALUMNIA.
LA RESEÑA DE LUDLOW SOBRE IGNORANCIA DEL LENGUAJE

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Perhaps I should simply ignore Peter Ludlow's hostile review (2009) of *Ignorance of Language* (2006). But I cannot depend on its having no influence and so I shall respond.

In *Ignorance*, on the basis of five quotes and four further citations (96), I attribute to Chomskian linguists the view that, "noise" aside, the informational content of intuitive linguistic judgments are provided by the speaker's linguistic competence. I name this view, "the voice of competence" ("VoC"). I go on to argue that VoC is false.

In his review, Ludlow reacts negatively to this somewhat playful name for the view and rejects the attribution of VoC to Chomskians (2009). He declares that "none" of my quotes "speak to the point in question" (*Review of 400*). Yet he does not discuss the three quotes that provide the most telling evidence for my attribution, quotes from Chomsky (270), Fodor (200-1), and Graves et al. (225). In his recent book, *The Philosophy of Generative Linguistics* (2011), Ludlow returns to the issue of my attribution of VoC and does discuss these three quotes. Yet, as I point out (*Linguistic intuitions* sec. 4.2), Ludlow blatantly misrepresents the quotes and does nothing that undermines the obvious support that they give to the attribution. (The most remarkable part of Ludlow's discussion is his pronouncement, without even attempting to give evidence, that the quoted passage from Graves et al is "completely misrepresented" by me (*Ibid.* 270). Even the most cursory look at Graves et al would show that this is false).

The false declaration that none of my quotes speak to the point of the attribution of VoC is all Ludlow offers in support of one of his three sweeping criticisms of my book: “Devitt is not particularly charitable in his interpretation of what linguists have to say about the nature of their enterprise” (*Review of 399*). It is remarkable that Ludlow should make this criticism in a review that is about as uncharitable as it gets; plain nasty really.

I shall focus now on two passages in the review that give more of its flavor.

(I) Ludlow concludes a “case study” of part of *Ignorance* with another of his sweeping general criticisms:

This is just a case study in a kind of disease that infects the book. Premises are declared “uncontroversial” or “theory neutral” (and competing assumptions are declared “implausible”) and then are linked together with argumentative steps that supposedly “come with” or “follow from” or are “led to” or are “immediately apparent” from the allegedly benign premises. But the premises are not benign and the alleged argument is but a simulacrum of a real argument—it borrows the vocabulary of logical reasoning to walk us through a series of claims that Devitt considers platitudinous but do not follow and may well be false. (*Review of 297*)

Ludlow’s case study is of two paragraphs in a three-paragraph argument for the thesis that *the psychological reality of language should be investigated from a perspective on thought*. The book argues for thirteen other theses. Ludlow cites no other example of the “disease”. So Ludlow’s damning criticism of the arguments in this book rests solely on his case study of this tiny part. And this tiny part is in the middle of the book (*Ignorance of 128-9*), presupposing some important earlier discussions. Yet Ludlow’s case study largely ignores those discussions, criticizing the argument as if it stood alone. Let us look at Ludlow’s case study (which still contains misrepresentations despite my comments to Ludlow on two earlier drafts).I.ñ,

Consider, first, Ludlow’s three complaints about my “allegedly benign premises”.

- (i) The only premise I declare to be uncontroversial —actually, “relatively uncontroversial”— is the thesis that language expresses thought (LET) (Ibid. 127). And it is relatively uncontroversial, held, for example, by Fodor and Chomsky, as I note on pp. 127, and 174, respectively. Ludlow pronounces it, without a word of explanation, “very controversial” (*Review of 396*).
- (ii) I say that another thesis is “the most theory-neutral view” of competence in a language. This is the thesis that the competence is the ability to produce and understand sentences with the sounds and meanings of the language (*Ignorance of 128*). Ludlow picks away at this thesis for a page and a half, unconvincingly in my view (although he does make me wish that I had described the thesis as “least theory-laden” rather than “most theory-neutral”). He concludes that the thesis is “question begging”:

A big part of Devitt's pitch is the idea that linguists are not studying a species of knowledge that, but rather knowledge how. If you define competence so that it now means something like having an ability to produce and understand linguistic expressions, the knowledge-how thesis is arguably already baked into the cake. Maybe the knowledge-how thesis is correct, but it is no defense of the thesis to pack the conclusion into a key premise and declare the premise “theory-neutral” (or, for that matter, the “most theory-neutral” option). (*Review of 395*)

- (a) It is *no* part of my “pitch” that linguists are studying knowledge how. I think that they are studying languages, “external linguistic objects”, just as Ludlow has previously noted (Ibid. 393)! (b) Given that the allegedly question begging thesis is about linguistic competence, one presumes that Ludlow has simply misspoken. What he meant to say was that a big part of my pitch is that *this competence* is not “a species of knowledge that, but rather knowledge how”. But even that would be only half right. I certainly argue that this competence is not knowledge-that. So the half about knowledge-that would be right. I go on to say that if we must talk of it as knowledge, we should talk of it as mere knowledge-how. However, I prefer not to talk of it as knowledge at all: “I think that we should drop talk of knowledge from serious science” (*Ignorance of n. 5*). So the half about knowledge-how would not be right. (c) Even if the knowledge-how thesis was “baked into the cake” at this point, it would be no question because the only discussion of the thesis is in chapter 6, *before* the alleged baking.

In any case, this thesis about competence is just an initial and *obviously* unimportant one, soon replaced by a series of other more theory-laden ones. The thesis plays barely any role in the argument Ludlow is discussing (and none in any other to follow). It could be dropped with little cost. The relatively uncontroversial LET is what matters to the argument here and elsewhere.

(iii) There is no competing assumption here that is called “implausible” and he cites none elsewhere that are improperly so-called.

In sum, complaints (i) and (iii) are baseless and, with (ii), at best, Ludlow has a molehill that he is trying to turn into Everest.

Consider next Ludlow’s complaints about my “alleged argument”, which he finds “elusive” (*Review of 394*) and “obviously fallacious” (*Ibid. 396*). (a) His mention of “follow from” in characterizing the argument suggests that I intend it to be deductive. Ludlow labors the point that the argument is not deductively valid. Yet, despite Ludlow’s use of quotation marks, “follow from” is not to be found in my actual argument: Ludlow has introduced it for his own hostile purposes. And my argument is *obviously* ampliative not deductive (as are most arguments in a book that is, after all, seeking *the best explanation* of the psychological reality underlying language). (b) It is a truism that the persuasiveness of an ampliative inference depends on its background assumptions. Yet, in assessing my inference here, Ludlow takes no note of its key background assumption, established much earlier. This brings me to the second flavor-giving passage.

(II) Ludlow’s concluding paragraph includes the following:

The errors, individually and in concert, seem to play key roles in Devitt’s unflinching and at times desperate attempt to lead us to the conclusion that linguistics is not a chapter in cognitive psychology. (*Ibid. 401*)

Ludlow is referring to my conclusion that a grammar is about linguistic reality not psychological reality. (i) This “linguistic conception” of grammars (as I later called it) is my key background assumption for the ampliative inference that Ludlow finds “obviously fallacious”. *Given that assumption* the inference is good. And that it is good is confirmed, I think, by the fruitfulness of the later investigation of psychological

reality from perspectives on thought; for example, such perspectives are very relevant to assessing the likelihood that there is a language faculty (*Ignorance of* 12.5); and I argue that if the language-of-thought hypothesis is true then the linguistic rules are likely embodied (9.5), but if it's not true, they likely aren't (11.9). (ii) Now, of course, Ludlow does not share my background assumption, preferring the standard Chomskian "psychological conception" according to which grammars are about psychological reality. So it is not surprising that he is not persuaded by my ampliative inference. But a proper assessment of the inference must take account of its key background assumption, the linguistic conception. Indeed, a proper assessment of just about all the ampliative inferences in this book must take account of that background. (iii) The argument for the linguistic conception is in chapter 2, long before this ampliative inference (Cf. Devitt *Linguistic Intuitions, Explanation and*). There are no further arguments for it in the book, let alone "unflinching" and "desperate" ones. (iv) What Ludlow (wrongly) alleges to be "errors" come later and have absolutely nothing to do with the argument for the linguistic conception in chapter 2. (v) Ludlow dismisses that conception (*Review of* 397-9), the key background assumption, without any attention to my argument for it.

One can only wonder what drives a supporter of such a powerful and successful movement as Chomskian linguistics to respond in this style to a (mostly admiring) critic. It's a sad business. And Ludlow is not alone. I have remarked elsewhere on a pattern in Chomskian criticisms of *Ignorance* (happily not universal). "The pattern is one of misrepresentation, *ex cathedra* pronouncements, relentlessly uncharitable readings, and a wearingly impolite tone." I named names (*Methodology in* 671). Ludlow's must be added to the list. Something is rotten in the state of Chomskian philosophy of linguistics.

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