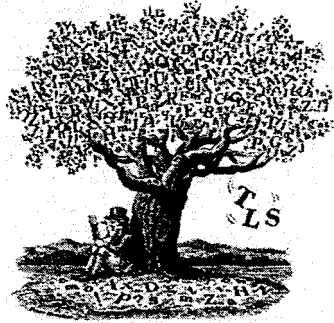


## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

# Language innateness

Sir, - As suggested by my review (October 5), if one is looking for data, arguments and evidence showing that innatism in cognitive science has been badly oversold, a good place to begin is Jesse J. Prinz's *Beyond Human Nature*. Ken Wexler's complaints about my paragraph on language miss the point (Letters, October 19). There is no question that language is unique to humans, and that it therefore can only be possible thanks to some thing in our biological make-up, including our genetics, that distinguishes us from other species. But proponents of "Universal Grammar" or UG claim something much more specific than this. They argue that there is a specific innate and genetically specified biological adaptation with linguistic content that is uniquely dedicated to facilitating the acquisition of language by the child. When scholars such as the psychologist Michael Tomasello have issued challenges to state exactly what is in UG, nobody can provide any specifics. Indeed, after decades of work since launching this line of research. Noam Chomsky with his colleagues Tecumseh Fitch and Marc Hauser announced in a 2002 article in *Science* that UG



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contains just one specification - a combinatorial principle called recursion - but this controversial proposal is by no means widely accepted. This is the sense in which the UG programme in particular has failed to deliver, as distinct from a lot of useful empirical research associated with it

Despite what Wexler's letter might imply, an account of language can be a biological one without claiming that there is "a core innate grammar": it can recognize cognitive representations without implying innate content, certainly without implying structure uniquely linguistic in character; and it can say that general statistical learning (of a more sophisticated kind than

1950s-style behaviourism, it must be said) is necessary for language without saying that it is sufficient for it. Wexler's letter overlooks the other indispensable element of an alternative to UG, namely our uniquely human but not language-specific social-ineractional cognitive infrastructure, including the capacity for shared intentionality that is a prerequisite scaffold for infants' developing experience with language. If readers want to consider the issues further they might consult the 2009 *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* feature article "The Myth of Language Universals" by Nicholas Evans and Stephen Levinson, with more than twenty spirited commentaries from scholars of many stripes. What we are seeing in the language sciences, as indeed Ken Wexler's letter shows, is that there appear to be alternative and incommensurable universes. This is none other than a clear sign of the very paradigm shift that Prinz's book is describing.

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