Chapter 7

Concluding Remarks

One basic question we started with in this dissertation was the following. Is language, a complex object because of its multiple dimensions, available for a standard scientific treatment? This question was approached from various perspectives – philosophical understanding of objects of enquiry, historical survey of what linguistics has been doing in the broader context of scientific discoveries, sociological examination of scientific institutions of linguistics and a rhetorical analysis of the written presentation of linguistics and also drawing on extensive work from history, philosophy and sociology of science in defining science.

The fact that linguistics is at the intersection of natural sciences and human sciences is also why some of its students are seriously drawn to it. As David Crystal (1987) pointed out:

Linguistics shares with other sciences a concern to be objective, systematic, consistent, and explicit in its account of language. Like other sciences, it aims to collect data, test hypotheses, devise models, and construct theories. Its subject matter, however, is unique: at one extreme, it overlaps with such 'hard' sciences as physics and anatomy; at the other, it involves such traditional arts subjects as philosophy and literary criticism. The field of linguistics includes both science and humanities, and offers a breadth of coverage that, for many aspiring students of the subject, is the primary source of its appeal.

This quote needs to be annotated in light of what has been attempted in this thesis. Sapir (1929) had pointed out this 'dual nature' of linguistics. This thesis has mainly been a critique of the term 'science' applied to linguistics. Towards the end, there was also an attempt to examine the discipline from a humanities angle – using literary and interpretive approaches. But the discussion in the central chapters dealt with persuasive attempts, such as Chomsky's, to define the science of linguistics from the prevailing discourse in analytical philosophy. As they see their projects to be continuous with natural sciences, it would be considered sacrilegious – almost blasphemous – to refer to the subjects studied.

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by some analytical philosophers as coming under “traditional arts.” In this work, the criticism of the scientific project came from the influence of rhetoric and metaphorical aspects of language and the roles of social networks in making the discipline a science and not from analytical philosophy in a substantial sense.

The objective of this thesis was to critically examine the science claims of linguistics, specifically the generative grammar approach based on the biolinguistic framework. The attempt was rather ambitious because of the multiple dimensions of both linguistics and science. Although the enquiry was incomplete, the attempt was to raise a few relevant questions and engage with the discussions.

The three initial chapters which set the basic context of the discussion were followed by an evaluation of the claims to science made by its leading advocates in chapter 4. Chapter 5 focused on explanations and methods in linguistics and examined how they illuminated the discussion on the scientificity of the discipline. Chapter 6 turned the spotlights on questions that are integral to science, but scientists are often in denial about. These questions are the ones relating to how socio-cultural factors, gender and rhetoric have an impact on the practice of science.

Chapter 4 critiqued Chomsky's position about language as a scientific object by arguing against his definition of the object of enquiry. The chapter on methods, laws and explanations showed that the historical and synchronous aspects of language call for a treatment that is different from what is seen in disciplines like physics. The chapter on supplementary issues tried to argue that questions of gender and rhetoric may be intrinsic to the scientific project rather than extrinsic.

Coming to the contributions, the main attempt was to critique the object of enquiry as it was defined by one of the most influential propounders of a naturalist programme to study language. That approach crucially involved the assertion that the scientific approach to study language has to necessarily be from an essentially internalist and syntactocentric perspective. This attempt seemed to, at least partly, stem from a
narrow conception of what constitutes science. For the critique, we used some of the arguments for externality, inconsistencies in the nature of the object studied by the generativists and deficiencies in terms of empirical data. Dasgupta's (1988) observation regarding the relationship between the social functions of expressions provided a central argument to critique the project of scientization of the discipline.

A second attempt was to show how rhetoric and sociological factors influence the practice of linguistics as a science. As part of the rhetoric discussion, we took on two issues which are not entirely related. Firstly, we discussed the centrality of metaphors in language which is often excluded from a syntax-centred approach. Secondly, we examined some of the rhetorical devices adopted in the science-making project for linguistics. Additionally, it was also attempted to indicate that a different make-up of the institutional structure of linguistics might lead to a more empirically sound science of language.

Several disciplines within the traditional social sciences and humanities seem to be adopting practices of science, such as a greater use of formalisms and computational modelling. This drive is presumably motivated by greater prestige, funds and respectability and could be interpreted as something along the lines of epistemological sanskritisation as explained by Sarukkai (1995). We have tried to closely examine some aspects of this scientization with respect to linguistics. It is hoped that this study would add to the broader discussion on the effects of such a process in the humanities, especially the deficiencies of such a drive.

Finally, there is the question of what constitutes science. Although the analysis was about how linguistics, or a powerful framework of it, tries to gain the scientific label and as a result, acquire greater credibility. In this process, we had a somewhat close engagement with the philosophy and practice of science. As a result, perhaps, in small ways, we hope to have contributed to the discussion of what constitutes science.

When these questions were thought through, I found that the conditions of realism

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Sarukkai, “Epistemological Sanskritisation.”

252
and naturalism pertaining to scientific objects are dealt with in an unclear way in linguistics. Sociological factors also seemed to have an effect on the questions asked and the solutions proposed within the field because the viewpoints and networks of the inquirers impact the questions asked and solutions proposed within the field. Further, apart from the content, the mode of presentation also has a significant role in the science-making process.

Galileo's thrust on mathematisation was seen as a move away from a completely human-centred approach. Part of the attempt here is to bring the human back to the centre of the scientific project. But given the current understanding of environment and biodiversity and the criticisms of development projects, an entirely anthropocentric approach is not entirely desirable. Maybe science has to develop new perspectives such as life or life in broader contexts where human beings draw sustainably from non-living and living entities such as rivers, forests, trees and animals. What should be our alternative to an objective world view promoted by science? This remains as one of the unresolved questions. This is much more pronounced in the case of linguistics than other disciplines because as we discussed at great length, the question of an objective analysis of language is still a highly contentious point.

Gadamer has a radically different conception of language from the thinkers who either thought of it as a system of signs, or as a tool for communication or as a natural object.\(^3\) He considers language “the most compelling phenomena of non-objectivity” because of its refusal to have a clear content. The dynamism of language has been discussed to a small extent in the chapter on rhetoric, but we have not attempted a detailed criticism coming from the view of language illustrated by Gadamer's position.

Another pertinent question that could not be explored in this thesis is the nature of language as an object that escapes the observer's grasp. The process of ‘science-making’ performs a role of ‘skeletizing’ language. Language is stripped of its intimate and dynamic properties as a conveyor of emotions, thoughts and a cause for social cohesion and

tensions; as a creative and fluid tool of communication imbued with powers of social transformation and redefinition. The problematic tendency of science-making as outlined in chapters 1 and 2 is that it becomes narrowly defined according to the belief systems of the scientist. In this process of constructing a science of language, what seems to be happening is the displacement of language from collective ownership by the speech community to a small group of experts. Perhaps what that suggests is that the discipline needs a systemic change which would merge the scientific with the intimately social, the empirical with the experiential.

4 This idea came up in conversations with J Griffin and was articulated in a small way in a joint poster: Joanna Griffin and Jobin Kanjiarakat, “Language, Art and Authorship: A Comparative Approach towards Making Sense of the Science-Society Question,” Science and Society 2013: Emerging Agendas for Citizens and Sciences [poster presentation], University of Ottawa, Canada (2013).