Some years ago there was a great flurry of popular excitement about the theories of Erich von Däniken (1972) concerning the extraterrestrial provenance of assorted great non-European monuments. Von Däniken claimed that these structures had to have been created by aliens from outer space. His main argument in support of this theory was that they were not created by Europeans, leaving no other earthly source. Here is the great pyramid of Chichén Itzá, the announcer would intone in the artfully filmed documentary, and here passing in front of it are three or four slow-moving modern Maya people leading a burro—surely these people could not have created a structure like this, let alone their ancient (hence even slower-moving) ancestors. Many commentators observed that this technique could be used to make an equally convincing argument that the Empire State Building in New York City could not have been built by the ancestors of the New Yorkers eating donuts and playing checkers in its shadow, either.

Despite the scorn of the experts (Story 1976), von Däniken’s work had great popular appeal. And though many of us might think that von Däniken’s work is the lowest form of pop anthropology, the fact is that there are works even lower on the scale. There are any number of books that seek to popularize von Däniken, by presenting his views even more simplistically than he does. You have been fascinated by the theories all your friends are talking about, goes the blurb on the inside page, and here they are without the complexities.

The point is, then, that what is one person’s scholarly tome is another’s vulgar popularization, and there are many steps on the pyramid, ranging from specialist technical works with relatively small readerships at the top, down through works aimed at increasingly broader publics to mass-selling popular works at the wide base. In well-publicized fields, there is an abundance of publications at every level of the pyramid. In linguistics, we face some disconcerting gaps between the top and the bottom.

From time to time this column has commented on the fact that the study of theoretical linguistics, in particular what has been called the generative enterprise, is not widely understood or properly appreciated outside of the relatively narrow circle of its practitioners. There are several aspects to this problem, corresponding to different levels of the pyramid of popularization, and they are not all susceptible to the same type of solution.

At the base of the pyramid, we have newspaper columns and popular books on language. With a few exceptions, these are at best indifferent to modern linguistics, and more usually actively hostile to it. In this sense, the popular base does not adequately reflect the research activity going on at the top. In most other disciplines, by contrast, there exist publications that attempt to convey a sense of the frontiers of research to the general public.

Linguists are sometimes criticized for not writing in a style that would be more accessible to a wider public, but I think this criticism misses the mark. When one publishes an article in a scholarly journal, one writes for the research community, not the general public. The problem here is the lack of appropriate publications that aim at a popular level. A scholarly journal cannot do this job. It would be a mistake to try to transform The Canadian Journal of Linguistics or Linguistic Inquiry into Popular Linguistics or Linguistics Illustrated; rather, what is needed are new magazines designed specifically to fill this niche.
It is instructive that many scholars who publish in scholarly journals in other fields also contribute lucid articles to more popular publications, where these exist, in which they discuss their theories in relatively nontechnical terms. I believe there are many linguists capable of doing the same, if only they had somewhere to publish articles of this nature. Everybody has some sort of interest in language, so there ought to be a market for a popular magazine about language and linguistics. Such a publication does not exist today, as far as I know.

Theoretical linguists do not only have difficulty communicating with the mass public. There are some serious gaps much higher up the linguistics pyramid as well. Some of the basic premises and results of modern linguistics remain little known even to those in related fields. How could we show such people that seemingly esoteric and abstract theoretical concepts are relevant to their concerns, which may be descriptive or pedagogical?

We don’t need to go so far as Popular Linguistics and Linguistics Illustrated to reach this audience. How about a journal called, say, Natural Language and Linguistic Theory? The aim of such a journal could be to provide “a forum for discussion of theoretical research that pays close attention to natural language data, so as to provide a channel of communication between researchers of diverse points of view.” The journal could actively seek “to bridge the gap between descriptive work and work of a highly theoretical, less empirically oriented nature.” In attempting to strike this balance, a primary goal of the journal could be “to encourage work which makes complex language data accessible to those unfamiliar with the language being studied, and work which makes complex theoretical positions more accessible to those working outside the theoretical framework under review.”

As many readers may know, such a journal already exists, by that very name. The quoted material in the previous paragraph is from its mission statement that appears on the back cover of every issue. Does NLLT in fact bridge the gap between descriptive work and work of a highly theoretical nature? I think it does, quite successfully. A typical article in NLLT proceeds from a set of complex language data that eludes an adequate description or explanation in terms of previous accounts, and proposes that a better description or explanation is available in terms of some (perhaps complex) theoretical concepts. Thus, the theory sheds light on the data, and the data provide empirical support for the theory.

So much for the work. When we consider the workers, the picture is less clear. Does the journal bridge the gap between theoreticians and those whose interests are mainly descriptive or applied? Not really, nor is it intended to. For its mission statement goes on to say that the journal is structured to include “interdisciplinary contributions written with theoretical linguists in mind.” Thus, the journal can be a meeting place for theoretical linguists working in different frameworks; but to succeed in this endeavour, it cannot at the same time cater to the needs of those who do not know much linguistic theory.

Still, perhaps we are missing a chance here to show those who are not theoretical linguists how “highly theoretical” work can shed light on “complex language data”. As mentioned above, most articles in NLLT (and for that matter, in any linguistics journal) already do this, or try to. The problem is, that nobody outside the field knows this, because only a theoretical linguist can understand what is going on. What we need is a companion journal, NLLT Light, in which the articles in NLLT are restated in a form that is more generally accessible.

Of course, it would be asking a lot of all authors of articles accepted by NLLT to provide a second version for NLLT Light. But perhaps we can start small, with just the abstracts. Imagine someone interested in the Greek language, a nonlinguist, browsing the following abstract by Arhonto Terzi in NLLT 17,1:

In this work we investigate the implications of Kayne’s (1994) antisymmetry proposals for the position to which clitics adjoin in the sentence and the manner in which two (or more) clitics may
combine. It is demonstrated that adjunction of clitics to Agr\(^0\) is excluded by antisymmetry, leading to results in the spirit of Chomsky (1995), who dispenses with the notion of agreement as a functional head, hence as a potential adjunction site for clitics. Assuming that the Linear Correspondence Axiom does not apply after spell-out, we argue that T\(^0\) serves as a host of clitics when Tense features are weak...We present evidence from Greek dialects which supports these claims and instantiates the different manner in which clitics combine in clusters. We extend our proposals to explain similar issues pertaining to the clitic system of the Standard Romance languages.

It is not clear to me what anyone but a syntactician could make of this. Terzi’s article is indeed rather technical; but the abstract concentrates entirely on the theory, without the bridge to the data. Drawing on passages in the article, here is what the abstract in \textit{NLLT Light} might look like:

A striking property of the clitic system of Standard Greek is that while double object clitics precede the finite verb in the order dative-accusative only (\textit{Mou to edoses}), they follow imperatives in either order (\textit{Dos’ mou to!}, \textit{Dos’ to mou!}). Is flexible clitic order, then, a result of post-verbal position? No. For Cypriot Greek allows double object clitics to follow finite verbs, as well as imperatives; but the ordering of the clitics is still fixed when attached to a finite verb, even in post-verbal position, while it is flexible following imperatives. This article will demonstrate that these facts are not accidental, but can be explained in terms of a theory of abstract syntactic nodes to which clitics can move and adjoin in limited ways. We extend our proposal to explain why very similar facts are found in the Standard Romance languages.

This abstract is too light on theory to get an invitation to speak at GLOW or NELS. And perhaps it is not yet light enough to pull in a significantly wider readership; but at least phonologists will be able to understand it. Terzi’s abstract is quite typical of those in \textit{NLLT}, and any number of other examples could be cited to the same effect.

Sadly, one article in volume 1 of \textit{NLLT 17} does not have an abstract, but rather an editorial note expressing sorrow over the untimely death of its author, Teun Hoekstra. The article, a reply to Lieber and Baayen (1997), concerns the principles governing auxiliary selection in Dutch: whether the auxiliary \textit{zijn} ‘be’ or \textit{hebben} ‘have’ is selected in any given case. The article is a fine example of work that employs sophisticated theoretical concepts to address a problem that even nontheorists can appreciate. Hoekstra reviews and critiques the accounts of traditional grammars, as well as more recent proposals, assessing to what extent they are accurate and explanatory.

Teun Hoekstra never courted popularity or compromised his views to gain a wider following. Nevertheless, through his dedication and enthusiasm for gaining a deeper understanding of grammar, he did much to inspire an appreciation for the same qualities in others. And perhaps this is the type of popularization we should ultimately be most concerned with: to improve our own little piece of the pyramid.

References


