The Conceptual Structure of Linguistic Theory

Part I:
What is a Tree?

Robert May
University of California, Davis

abstract

In this talk, based on collaborative work with Adam Sennet, I explore the following issue: Are the properties of linguistic representations themselves linguistic properties? This is to be distinguished for a very similar question: Do linguistic representations represent linguistic properties? These are distinct, since the latter is a virtual truism, while the former is at least arguably false. The first part of the talk will discuss the notion of linguistic representation - *L-marker* - as that notion is developed in the theory of Chomsky’s *Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*, and its relation to the core theoretical notions of linguistic level and derivation. I will then turn to the relation of semantic interpretation to this notion syntactic representation in the context of work on LF and anaphora, with attention paid to arguments for poverty of the stimulus. It will be argued that there is a *prima facie* incoherence at play, for the arguments depend on specifying linguistic laws in terms of properties of linguistic representations, and not on the basis of what they represent. The point is discussed that syntactic representations are fully interpreted, and are not subject to further (semantic) interpretation. The talk closes with some speculative remarks on the relation of syntax and semantics.