

Book Review

Thomas S. Stroik and Michael T. Putnam, *The structural design of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xvii + 190 pages, ISBN 978-1-107-03483-9 (hardback), USD 94.99, GBP 59.99.

Denis Bouchard, *The nature and origin of language* (Studies in the Evolution of Language 18). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xiii + 385 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-968162-4 (hardback), USD 135, GBP 79; ISBN 978-0-19-968163-1 (paperback), USD 50, GBP 30.

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1 Background

In the last few decades syntax-centric generative theory has been beleaguered more from the outside than from the inside of linguistics. First it was learnability, which continues to be the major reason why computational linguists tend to prefer other models. More recently it is evolutionary biology (Bouchard's book was preceded by no fewer than 17 volumes in the Oxford series on evolution of language). And this time the rebellion is from within the ranks.

The two books under review are the work of experienced syntacticians. Both Bouchard (B) and Stroik & Putnam (S&P) take as their starting point the evolutionary biological implausibility of Chomsky's original proposal that human language is based on a new, species-specific syntactic computational system that arose more or less *ex machina*. Both complain about the excessive, cognitively unmotivated baggage in (not-so-)minimalism. Both accept that the transition from prelanguage to language was abrupt; for B, perhaps a single generation. Both argue that this development was triggered by the expansion of pre-existing neural structures, which crossed a tipping point of quantitative complexity and triggered a self-(re)organization.

This point is argued at length in B's book, which begins with a long review of previous writings on the evolution of language (Jackendoff, Pinker, Bickerton, Chomsky, Hurford). All are found to be defective, chiefly because they all include at least some teleological elements (human language evolved because it confers selective advantages) without providing a realistic road map. S&P share this view though their discussion of it is much briefer (their book is self-described as a "manifesto" and is correspondingly terse). Both books stress