Language as skill

Abstract
Is the ability to speak a language an acquired skill? Leading proponents of the generative approach to human language—notably Chomsky (2000) and Pinker (2003)—have argued that the thesis that language capacities are skills is hopelessly confused and at odds with a range of empirical evidence, which suggests that human language capacities are grounded in a biologically inherited set of language instincts or a Universal Grammar (UG). In this paper, I argue that resistance to the claim that human language capacities are skills has been fostered by naïve and implausible conceptions of the nature of skilled action. Correcting these misconceptions about the nature of skilled action breathes new life into the old idea that human language competences are particular kinds of skills and does so in a way that is fully consistent with appeals to the central importance of UG. More generally, I argue that by taking human language capacities to be skills, we capture what is right about the generative program while at the same time avoiding its most serious pitfalls.