

Inconsistency in Linguistic Theorising

It is widely believed that inconsistency is one of the greatest sins a scholar can commit. This issue is especially relevant in linguistics due to the rich diversity of data types, exceptions to the rules, counterexamples to the hypotheses, and background assumptions which constantly come into conflict with methodological principles. Bringing together ideas from linguistics and philosophy of science, this groundbreaking book seeks to answer the following questions: which kinds of inconsistency arise in linguistic theorising? Under which conditions can inconsistencies be tolerated? And how can inconsistencies be resolved? It is the first study to develop a novel metatheoretical framework that accounts for the emergence and the resolution of inconsistency in linguistic theorising, and to reveal the strategies of inconsistency resolution in theoretical linguistics. Supported by detailed case studies, the findings of this metatheoretical analysis can be applied to improve the effectiveness of the working linguist's problem-solving activity.

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In memoriam Árpád.

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Preface

The present book is our latest contribution to the history and philosophy of linguistics. It continues a series of previously published monographs and papers discussing foundational problems of linguistic inquiry systematically. This long-term programme aims at the clarification of issues that have not been dealt with extensively in the literature we know, although their relevance seems to be beyond doubt. Among others, the topics we have already tackled include the structure and the function of linguistic data and evidence; the structure of linguistic theories; the peculiarities of thought experiments and real experiments in linguistics; fallacies in linguistic theorising; the relation between the social and the cognitive factors that shape the content of linguistic theories; and the historiography of linguistics. In raising these and further issues, we have proceeded in parallel on two levels. First, we have based our metatheoretical research on a great number of detailed case studies in the fields of generative syntax, cognitive semantics, pragmatics, and phonology. Second, we have put forward a metatheoretical framework – called the p-model – capable of accounting for the foundational problems at hand and of analysing the subject matter of diverse case studies.

Our programme centres around our idea that linguistic theorising can be modelled as a dynamic process of plausible argumentation. This tenet yields a perspective that assumes a very close interplay between metatheoretical reflection and object-theoretical research that is expected to enhance the effectiveness of problem-solving in linguistics. This perspective boils down to the insight that it is worth enriching the working linguist's toolkit with the results of conscious metatheoretical reflection, which may constitute a fertile component of linguistic theorising.

In the present monograph, we will attempt to supplement our long-term programme with a topic that seems to be no less relevant than the ones just enumerated: the kinds of inconsistencies emerging in linguistic theorising and the strategies of their resolution. In addition, we will also refine and extend the p-model and apply it to several case studies analysing the nature of inconsistencies in linguistic theories.

The book is a research monograph whose primary target group is linguists. However, it also raises problems of current research in argumentation theory and the philosophy of science. Therefore, as a secondary target readership, it also addresses philosophers of science and argumentation theorists. Nevertheless, since it includes a series of examples intended to be simple and illuminating, it can also be used as a textbook introducing graduate and undergraduate students to the foundational problems and the research methods of theoretical linguistics.

Although the book deals with abstract problems, we have done our best to put forward our ideas and to structure our line of reasoning in an as reader-friendly manner as possible. First, Chapters 2–9 begin with a section entitled ‘Introduction’. These subchapters feed back to the previous chapter, outline the argumentation that the chapter at issue presents, and anticipate the particular finding to be expected. Second, Chapters 2–9 are also completed with a section entitled ‘Conclusions’ consisting of two sub-sections entitled ‘Looking Back’ and ‘Looking Ahead’, respectively. As the titles suggest, these sub-sections summarise the main findings of the chapter at issue again, and prepare the next step of our reasoning, namely, the problem to be raised and discussed in the subsequent chapter. Third, in the concluding chapter of the book (Chapter 11), the sub-sections ‘Looking Back’ and ‘Looking Ahead’ summarise our whole line of reasoning and touch on the future prospects of our findings. Fourth, for the reader’s convenience, we repeat the definitions and theses introduced whenever they are referred to in later stages of our argumentation. Fifth, even though we assume our findings to be generalisable, they are illustrated by case studies on well-known and widely discussed grammatical theories in the hope that the reader’s familiarity with them will make it easier to follow our train of thought. Finally, the front matter includes the enumeration of all figures, abbreviations, and central terms in a tabular format also mentioning the page of their first relevant appearance so that they can be found promptly if the reader wants to recapitulate them.

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Abbreviations and central terms

		First relevant occurrence
		<i>page</i> 4
(P)	The Main Problem of the book	
(P1)	the central problem of Chapter 2	5
(SVAPS)	the standard view of the analytical philosophy of science	13
(SVI)	the standard view of inconsistency	14
(SP1)	the solution to (P1)	28
(P2)	the central problem of Chapter 3	5
(E)	the term ‘evidence’ in the standard view of the analytical philosophy of science	31
(SVLD)	the standard view of linguistic data	32
(SP2)	the solution to (P2)	87
(PAIT)	the Principle of Absolute Inconsistency Tolerance	92
(PAII)	the Principle of Absolute Inconsistency Intolerance	92
(P3)	the central problem of Chapter 4	5
(S)	superposition	95
(TO)	truth operator in possible worlds	95
(WI)	weak inconsistency	96
(SI)	strong inconsistency	96
(SP3), (SP3’)	the solution to (P3)	108
(P4)	the central problem of Chapter 5	5
(SP4)	the solution to (P4)	125
(P5)	the central problem of Chapter 6	6
(PV)	the plausibility value of statements	154
(DAT)	the term ‘data’	163
(WE)	the term ‘weak evidence’	165
(RE)	the term ‘relative evidence’	165
(SE)	the term ‘strong evidence’	165

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(STO)	a statement obtains in a p-context	166
(SOO)	a source obtains in a p-context	166
(AP)	a statement is all-plausible in a p-context	166
(PSP)	p-superposition	167
(PPC)	p-paraconsistency	167
(SPI)	strong p-inconsistency	168
(P6)	the central problem of Chapter 7	6
(P6) _{i-iii}	the subproblems of (P6)	190
(SP6) _i	the solution to (P6) _i	206
(SP6) _{ii}	the solution to (P6) _{ii}	227
(SP6) _{iii}	the solution to (P6) _{iii}	228
(SP6)	the solution to (P6)	228
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(SP)	the solution to (P)	308