Travelodge

February 6, 1991

Dear Friend —

I have been in California this winter, and have only recently been able to read your article in Languages, which I have now reread more than once. It is a masterly essay in metamathematics, selecting and presenting the issues in a way that opens a path through them. "Comment un peu de mathématique peut-il se transmuer en linguistique" is precisely what I have been seeking, said better than I could have said. In general, every point you make here is just what I was after, except that the formulation is deeper, and the large picture you build sees farther than I did.

About constructivism: I realize that finitary and constructive are inadequate for a total theory of mathematics if such can exist (and I appreciate what you say about a mathematician's task in lieu of such a theory), but in linguistics there is a special reason for a finitary metatheory and a constructive actuality, namely the finiteness of the human body and lifetime (and of the species to date) — unless one thinks that what drives the development ~~and structure~~ of language and its envelope structure is some relation or reality more general than man. I thought of my own attempts as being constructivist more than specifically intuitionist, because the reality and testability of the ultimate elements did not seem to me to be an issue in language (even if the ultimate elements are phonemic distinctions). But I do think that tertium non datur is untenable in any man-made or finite situation — other descriptions are always possible there. Indeed a major mistake in scientific articles is setting up an "alternative" and proving X from non-Y.

Partly because I did not study much mathematics in recent years (decades), but primarily because of course I am entirely no mathematician, I was working with too simple an understanding both of the theory of Types and of category theory (as housing for cryptomorphism). The remarks you make enable me therefore to understand some aspects of my own work or results.

Travelodge

It was a rare experience for me to see how essentially my attempts could be understood; indeed my interests and intentions were always in some kind of applied mathematics (not in the usual sense) and not in linguistics for its own sake. But it was a greater experience to see what more one could make of it, as you did. It was worth doing the work, just to see such an analysis of it.

I was also not unaware that I was seeing here a piece of literary art constructed out of the scientific content itself. Science can support its own art.

Answer,

Zelig Harris

LA JOLLA
6700 La Jolla Blvd., La Jolla, CA 92037 (619) 454-0716

[Transcript of the letter]

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As ever,

Zellig Harris