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Letters

What makes a grammar good?

The linguistic structures of Bambara and Swiss German ("Exceptions to the Rule," SN: 11/16/85, p. 314) are interesting in their own right. It's a pity they become fodder for the debate over what types of grammar could theoretically describe human language. Chomsky et al. argue against simple grammars by adopting the convenient fiction that language is infinite, that sentences can be arbitrarily long. But sentences trillions of words long are not part of human language, and therefore a finite-state grammar provides all the theoretical power needed.

What is less clear, and worth serious attention, is the nature of the *best* grammar(s) describing any given language. The criteria for a good grammar presumably include the ability to capture and display understandable patterns of a language. Grammars should not be judged by the bogus credential of yielding nice

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Cover: Animals have been surprisingly successful in adapting to urban living, but their proximity to humans has created problems for both. According to participants in a recent symposium at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., humans also must learn to adapt by recognizing the significance of urban wildlife. (Illustration: Warren Cutler/National Zoo)



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mathematical regularities that do not reflect the reality of human language.

Robin Ault
Newtonville, Mass.

Jazz fans

So reader Judith Kurland doesn't like your "jazzy" covers (Letters, SN: 11/9/85, p. 291)? Stuff and nonsense. It's precisely this kind of arrogant, dusty attitude that keeps people from becoming involved with science. If more publications reported scientific happenings with the wit and wryness of SCIENCE NEWS, science wouldn't be considered so "serious" (i.e. boring).

My IQ is in the 160-plus range but somehow that has never stopped me from appreciating a good two-color print job or a clever, alliterative headline like "The Geomagnetic Jerk."

Susan Zalewski
Tucker, Ga.

I agree in part with Judith Kurland's letter: Your covers and headlines certainly should be tasteful and appeal to intelligent people. Fortunately, they are and they do.

I very much like your "jazzy" new covers. Jazz, like science, is ultimately an expression of the playful impulse of creativity, and the wonderful juxtapositions of concepts that your headline writers often create are quite in keeping with the spirit of both. Kurland has fallen into the error of confusing seriousness with solemnity. One of the joys of SCIENCE NEWS is its freedom from pomposity and self-importance.

Please maintain your playful ways. I assure that you will appeal to many intelligent people. And there is, of course, no arguing of matters of taste.

Michael Ham
Santa Cruz, Calif.

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