Language accepts letters from readers that briefly and succinctly respond to or comment upon either material published previously in the journal or issues deemed of importance to the field. The editor reserves the right to edit letters as needed. Brief replies from relevant parties are included as warranted.

Response to a review

September 30, 2010

To the Editor:

Jan Terje Faarlund's review of *Language complexity as an evolving variable* (ed. by Geoffrey R. Sampson, David Gil, and Peter Trudgill, Oxford University Press, 2009) in *Language* 86.3.748–52 contains several questionable statements; I should like to correct one, where Faarlund takes a sideswipe at work not contained in the book reviewed and that he does not identify by name, though in context his reference is clear. My introduction to the book reviewed by Faarlund cited Guy Deutscher's *Syntactic change in Akkadian* (Oxford University Press, 2000), which describes the acquisition of complement clauses by an ancient language that previously lacked them. Faarlund says: 'Since [Akkadian] is "one of the earliest languages to have been reduced to writing", this of course means an "absence of finite complement clauses" in the extant written documents' (p. 749).

I am not sure whether Faarlund's 'of course' represents his own view or one he is attributing to me, but either way this comment misses the point. If Deutscher were merely discussing gaps in the historical record, his book would be of interest only to Akkadian specialists. In reality, Deutscher describes the record as rich enough to show a language equipping itself with an important recursive structure for the first time, by adapting elements previously used for other grammatical purposes. His book is thus of great interest to any theoretical linguist (though it has received surprisingly little attention), since it directly contradicts the widely held belief that 'the earliest written documents already display the full ... grammatical complexity of modern languages' (Ray S. Jackendoff, *Patterns in the mind*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 32). Faarlund would be entitled to argue that Deutscher has somehow misinterpreted the Akkadian data, but he should not just casually misrepresent Deutscher's central thesis to the *Language* readership.

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Faarlund replies: The 'of course' in the quote given by Sampson represents both my own view and the one I attributed to him, since we both agree that in an extinct language, all the evidence we have are the written sources, so OF COURSE absence of finite complement clauses in Ancient Akkadian can only mean absence from the written sources. Sampson's point was that Deutscher in his book shows that complement clauses gradually developed during the history of Akkadian, and therefore that there must have been a stage without such clauses. My purpose of commenting on this passage was to point out that absence of finite complement clauses in a finite (apologies for the involuntary pun) corpus from a certain period is not an argument against the existence of recursion—for two reasons: recursion does not only involve finite embedding; and 'absence of evidence' is not 'evidence of absence'.

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https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2010.0028 Published online by Cambridge University Press