The ultimate objective of our research is to gain a better understanding of man's mental capacities by studying the ways in which these capacities manifest themselves in language. Language is a particularly promising avenue because, on the one hand, it is an intellectual achievement that is accessible to all normal humans and, on the other hand, we have more detailed knowledge about language than about any other human activity involving man's mental capacities.

Scientific descriptions of languages have for a very long time followed a standard format. A number of topics are almost invariably discussed; for example, pronunciation, the inflection of words, word formation, the expression of syntactic relations, word order, and so forth. Moreover, the manner in which these have been treated has also been quite standard. While traditional grammars have many shortcomings, their great practical utility is beyond question; generations of students have acquired adequate command of innumerable languages with the help of grammars of the standard type. A plausible inference that might be drawn from this fact is that languages are somehow not very different from one another and the traditional standard format has succeeded in capturing essential aspects of what all languages share in common. Accordingly, much of the research of our group has been devoted to studying the common framework.
that underlies different languages, the general principles that are exemplified in the
grammar of different languages. Results strongly indicate that this assumption is
indeed correct as far as the linguistic evidence is concerned.

The preceding discussion leads quite naturally to the question, "What evidence from
outside of linguistics might one adduce in favor of the hypothesis that all languages are
constructed in accordance with a single plan, a single framework?" It seems to us that
the most striking evidence in favor of the hypothesis is, on the one hand, the rapidity
with which children master their mother tongue, and, on the other hand, the fact that
even a young child's command of his mother tongue encompasses not only phrases and
utterances he has heard but also an unlimited number of phrases and utterances he has
not previously encountered. To account for these two sets of facts, we must assume
that in learning a language a child makes correct inferences about the structural prin-
ciples that govern his language on the basis of very limited exposure to the actual sen-
tences and utterances. In other words, we must assume that with regard to matters
of language a child is uniquely capable of jumping to the correct conclusions in the over-
whelming majority of instances, and it is the task of the student of language to explain
how this might be possible.

A possible explanation might run as follows. Assume that the human organism is
constructed so that man is capable of discovering only selected facts about language and,
moreover, that he is constrained to represent his discoveries in a very specific fashion
from which certain fairly far-reaching inferences about the organization of other parts
of the language would follow automatically. If this assumption is accepted, the next task
is to advance specific proposals concerning the devices that might be actually at play.
The obvious candidate is the theoretical framework of linguistics, for while it is
logically conceivable that the structure of language might be quite distinct from that of
the organism that is known to possess the ability to speak, it is much more plausible
that this is not the case, that the structures that appear to underlie all languages reflect
quite directly features of the human mind. To the extent that this hypothesis is cor-
rect – and there is considerable empirical evidence in its favor – the study of language
is rightly regarded as an effort at mapping the mysteries of the human mind.

Additional detailed information on various projects connected with this research is
available through inquiry to the department head, Dr. Samuel J. Keyser, Room 20D-105,
Ext. 4141.