Linguistics as Cognitive Science: Back to our Roots

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At the birth of Generative Grammar in the mid-20th century, Chomsky described an interdisciplinary field combining computation, psychology, and neuroscience. For linguists, results from sister disciplines could be made relevant to the theory of grammar through what might be called the Single Competence Hypothesis – that a unified system of knowledge of language underlies all that a human does with language. By the end of the 20th century, Cognitive Science had dis-unified and even within linguistics, results from one sub-discipline tended to be treated as irrelevant for others. Progress across the component Cognitive Sciences currently allows for a re-unification in line with Chomsky's original vision. I will present some recent results from my lab group, appropriately from studies of the roots of words, that illustrate ways that neuro and psycholinguistic experiments may bear directly on issues in linguistic theory, once we embrace the Single Competence Hypothesis and take the details of our representational theories seriously as claims about this linguistic competence. For example, neurolinguistic experimentation shows that we recognize a word like "vulnerable" via decomposition to the root vulner- despite the lack of additional words containing the same root, but in line with proposals from some (but not all) theories of linguistic competence.