Which Model of Biological Plausibility for Language?:
The Case of “What Darwin Got Wrong”*

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Ursini, Francesco-Alessio(2013), “Which Model of Biological Plausibility for Language?: The Case of “What Darwin Got Wrong,” Language & Information Society 19. The goal of this paper is to discuss some of the conceptual consequences of the arguments put forward in What Darwin Got Wrong, for a broader theory of the biolinguistic approach. The book offers arguments against “New Synthesis” approaches to Evolutionary Theory, that are particularly germane to biolinguistic matters. One main contention is that only approaches to evolutionary facts that capture the “laws of form” observed across living organisms can be theoretically and empirically adequate. However, the book does not investigate whether this contention applies to linguistic matters as well. This issue is addressed in the paper, and it is argued that organism-internal properties, which can be captured via the formal notion of “conservativity”, must be found in language as well. Therefore, it is argued that only those lin-

* I wish to thank Simone Gozzano, Nobuaki Akagi and Mario di Gregorio as colleagues that inspired to pursue this topic in a more critical perspective than the one I pursued in an earlier draft. I also wish to thank the comments of three anonymous reviewers, who motivated me to address with more rigour certain arguments in the paper. I would also like to thank the editorial board of Language and Information Society for the extensive support during the reviewing and publication process. I dedicate this work to my princess, as always. The usual disclaimers apply.

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guistic theories that capture these properties, be they about syntactic, semantic or acquisition matters alike can be considered as biolinguistically plausible.

Keywords: biolinguistics, evo-devo, conservativity, Minimalist programme, internalism.

1. Introduction: The Problem of Biological Plausibility for Language

Jerry Fodor and Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini’s joint effort, What Darwin Got Wrong, presents a criticism of neo-darwinist approaches to Evolutionary Theory. This criticism is based on the “new synthesis” model, classic and contemporary alike (Mayr 1963; Dawkins 1976, 1986; among others). Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini’s (henceforth: “the authors”) two main arguments against the new synthesis and its applications, as proposed in the book, can be informally summed up as follows. First, the new synthesis offers an explanatory model that works like Skinner’s theory of operant conditioning (Skinner 1957). Since Operant Conditioning is inadequate as an explanatory tool, the new synthesis model is equally inadequate to account the data it purports to account. Second, the new synthesis model is logically flawed: it aims to explain data by resorting to principles that are claimed not to be part of the model (artificial selection). So, no putative “recalibration” of the model is possible, in order to amend these theoretical flaws. A new evolutionary framework is called for, the authors of the book claim.

Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini (2008) does not sketch a fully defined alternative model. In this regard, the authors suggest that the evo-devo model of evolution offers a much more precise and reliable account of these processes (“Evolutionary-Developmental” model: Carroll 2005; Laubichler and Maienschein 2007; a.o.). At