THE IMPORTANCE TO GRAMMAR OF THE UTTERANCE

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In using the term 'utterance' I am not referring to unit size, but to language events as opposed to language items.   Suppose we take the form: 'There are lions.'   Some philosophers would call this a non-sentence.   A linguist might think of it as formally 'existential', perhaps quasi-existential.   Now statements of this kind may appear to be describing existence as opposed to non-existence, but in practice the act of making the statement does little more than set up an identification process, as though I were to say: 'I hereby identify the class of lions.'

This phenomenon was in part discussed by Austin (1962) but Austin went no further than the sentence.   If we set up a realization form which goes beyond a linearly represented terminal string and includes simultaneous features of prosody and context, we may call this form an utterance.   We might reinterpret Austin in these terms and state that 'There are lions' (whatever it means) exists in two forms, as a 'sentence', in which form it appears to have rather little meaning, and as an 'utterance' where it can be paraphrased in performative terms, has among other things a certain illocutionary function, and could be said to have a more positive meaning.

Notice that I still speak of utterance as a form, perhaps existing in our minds as a transcript.   In a normal transcription process there is no hope to date of separating the replicating act from the interpretative act.

In Chomskyan terms (1965), though, the implication is that the utterance is a string of phones, since 'sentence' is used by him "to refer to strings of formatives rather than to strings of phones."

Chomsky has long argued for the unsystematicness of utterances, but his impressionistic remarks are usually confined to little-understood features like "false starts, deviations from

rules, changes of plan in mid-course and so on." All of these are characteristic of rather sophisticated dinner-party types of speech, not the kind of primary data used in the home and fed into LAD. Labov was able in 1966 to show that utterances heard by a young child are surprisingly coherent and systematic. It is, of course, difficult to measure systematicness, but later on I hope to say something about a related concept, simplicity.

In any case, both the household and dinner party types of utterances shed light on grammar. For example, even if utterances are, as Chomsky suggests, full of various kinds of deviation, these deviations or errors frequently reveal underlying predispositions of speakers. Take, for example, uncertainties in concord: 'The government is/are ...' or the tendency for a later noun than the subject of an utterance to attract to itself the concordance of the verb: 'The efforts of independent nations towards industrialization has created huge problems' or phenomena like: 'these kind of books ...'

In transformational grammar, complex symbols include male-female and other selectional features near the formative string which correspond to overt concord-related forms. Even in generative semantics the bases may include a semantic set-individual distinction which appears overtly in concordant items. In this connection, McCawley agrees that 'The plural morpheme is not present in deep structure but is rather inserted by a rule ....' Surely, then, the fact that native speakers do fairly regularly make slips of concord confirms that those features which determine surface concord cannot be very far away from the surface. Thus what occurs at utterance level may in certain cases help us to cross-check priorities in the ordering of rules or even components. Perhaps our intuitions are half based on experience.

Returning to our empty sentence, 'There are lions,' we note that (a) as a sentence it can be disambiguated by the addition of some adverbial element like 'in the park,' but that this procedure changes it from a quasi-existential into a locative sentence; and (b) it behaves in a rather similar manner to 'These are lions,' where a deictic element gives an impression of contextualization or illocutionary force. Thus the statement 'There are lions' seems to partake of a performative rather than constative character. I ignore here Ross' suggested inclusion of a performative in all sentences. It therefore means something like 'I hereby identify these as lions.'

Identification statements have been shown by Halliday (1967-68) to depend for their meaning as utterances on prosodic features. The relationships are complex, even if some of the evidence is weak. Thus far, then, we have noted two features of utterance which distinguish it from a generated terminal string or sentence realization: its inbuilt prosodic features and its illocutionary function.

As Bar-Hillel pointed out in a review of Katz and Fodor (1964), there has been a neglect in transformational grammar of the distinction between utterances and sentences. Strang (1962) records an utterance:

> You didn't ask me what the substance was: you asked
> me to find out whether or not it was blood.

In utterance terms this is an articulated whole. In sentence terms it is two independent units. I realise the connection could be expressed in terms of anaphoric reference, or cohesion, or whatever, but that is not the point. In any case, less obviously linked forms exist: 'Stop: I want to get off.' Here, semantic considerations lead us to postulate a base linking element which we later delete. The point as I see it is that 'paratactic' constructions, so common in everyday speech, are more explicitly seen as cohesive at utterance level than as sentence-based structures. And if the cohesion turns out to be semantically motivated this should not necessarily lead to the assumption that 'depth' is needed to explicate it. Our intuitions might well suggest that the trouble with certain semantic notions is not their depth and inaccessibility so much as their ephemeral superficiality. Perhaps even the discarded notion of association, once regarded as unduly mentalistic, might offer a more rigorous mentalistic component for use in discourse problems than either deep grammar or semantic generation hypotheses. But before I am dismissed as being merely negatively anti-generative, let me suggest that (1) the generative semanticists may be right in assigning greater importance to the semantic component, and (2) older transformationists may be right in stating that grammar is 'deeper' and less accessible. If this were so, and if semantics operated 'on the surface' and more obviously than syntax, we might expect utterances to be revealing than has recently been supposed.

There is a logical fallacy in preoccupation with sentences to the exclusion of utterances. Sentences have 'structure' assigned to them, especially if they are rated as 'grammatical'. However this structure is only assigned, partly through intuitions which correlate strongly with traditional categories or relationships and partly through logically satisfying mental constructs

imposed without reference to traditional considerations. Given a non-literate upbringing, it is possible that a different set of traditional categories, relating primarily to spoken utterances, might be appealed to. Then on the introduction of writing, instead of spoken utterances being regarded as deviant, it might well be that written phenomena would appear less logically satisfying through the expectations and associations already aroused in the assignment of a structure to spoken language events. We are not here claiming that written forms are necessarily closer to Chomskyan type sentences than are spoken forms, though this may indeed be the case. We are merely suggesting that the linguists' intuition may to some extent be shaped by an expectation of regularity in his own mental constructs, and that these constructs are more likely to be associated with a static, readily accessible form of language such as the written form, and that it is an assumption that the patterns seen in these 'grammatical' forms are 'regular' since regularity is itself an intuitive notion hardly susceptible of empirical confirmation. Thus even the notion 'wholly and unequivocally grammatical' is in the final analysis a relative and not a categorial description, and is dependent on presuppositions about grammaticality which are largely based on mathematically biassed notions about the feature 'regularity,' or aesthetically biassed notions about the feature 'satisfactory.'

One very strong reason for regarding strings of edited phones as productive rather than merely supporting data is the rather obvious fact that all languages are not equally revealing in their utterance forms. Where prosodic features in one language can disambiguate surface strings through potential differences in utterance forms, in another language this would be handled by the presence or absence of a lexical form. Quite clearly 'I like eating apples' is at once disambiguated by translation into French or German and probably into any other language. If we were to eliminate from any one language all classes of ambiguities whose corresponding sets of meanings were not susceptible to ambiguous representation in some other language, it seems entirely likely that we should be left with rather few ambiguities and hence rather little need for deep structure to explicate them. We might go further and state that a good deal of the linguist's intuition about deep structure is based on knowledge of other languages, and that ambiguity is more difficult to handle where there is no obvious case known to the linguist of non-equivalence in overt forms elsewhere. At such points linguists often disagree as to whether syntactic ambiguity exists. If it does not exist in these blind areas it might then be argued that an appeal to deep syntax is unnecessary in a grammar. However, semantic ambiguity of the type concerning sad John and his sad book could only be explicated in terms of potential outside a language, probably not at all by prosodic features of utterances

and with some difficulty by a characterization of context.

One feature which persists in models of language is their stubborn linearity. We still draw boxes with arrows. There is typically a morphophonemic feature at one end and a semantic component at another end, but we seldom find a circular plan with direct links between the external feature, phonemic and semantic, as might obtain if we operated on the surface of a sphere. It seems amply clear that direct links are possible between meaning and form without a necessary journey through the system. This may be the reason why the study of speech functions has become more important of late.

The psychologist Lois Bloom realised the importance of associating an utterance with its context in her experimental studies, and a 1972 experiment by Blakar and Rommetveit showed that contextualized utterances are internalized ten times more easily than utterances in vacuo; at the other end of the scale the linguist-philosopher Austin drew attention to the illocutionary force of sentences. When utterances are collected and transcribed, they relapse quickly into sentencehood unless supported by (i) prosodic features and (ii) a record of the occasion of their utterance. We need a functionally explainable corpus of utterances. This involves semantic labelling, the use of which avoids giving the impression that the linguist can be a hundred per cent 'objective' by ignoring meaning. This point has of course been made by Chomsky, but in a rather different context.

Chomsky justifies his own use of a plus or minus semantic selectional feature system for lexis by arguing that lexical items are 'typically not strictly hierarchic, but (involve) rather cross classification.' In a different linguistic style this could mean they operate on a scale of delicacy, or perhaps superposition, rather than on a scale of rank, so that X is a Y is a Z, rather than Y and Z are kinds of X. Such a view also appears to force the lexicon to move from its uncomfortable seat behind or to one side of the syntactic component, so as to interact directly at surface with the context of situation, since the kind of cross-classification specified is not really part of the grammar.

Thus far we have seen how utterances can carry semantic information. What is the implication for the syntactic part of the grammar? Here we may observe a power in utterances in terms of their prosodic features, of their role in intuitive judgements, of their use as procedures and of their use in investigating the unknown.

Halliday (1967) has attempted to relate intonation to grammar, though the actual tunes he associates with the grammar are believed to be unrepresentative and based on insufficient evidence. Crystal (1969) prefers to share intonation between grammar, where it is usually inconclusive, and attitude. But phonology certainly appears to be capable of disambiguating utterances which as 'sentences' appear to be polysemous. It frequently depends on the utterance being spoken in an unmarked way, as in the case of 'I like eating apples,' but the mere existence of this potential alerts us to the idea that description is incomplete in the absence of some utterance features. Crystal acknowledges the functional role of intonation and leaves the door open for an indirect link with grammar.

The phenomenon of utterance completion may be mentioned here. It is a well attested fact that native speakers can frequently tell from the unexpected rhythm of a sentence what sort of unit will fill an empty place in a sequence, should a speaker leave his utterance incomplete. One version of Taylor's (1953) 'Cloze' procedure depends on this ability. This is just one further instance of the use to a linguist of utterance features to explicate deep grammatical patterns in his native language.

Polysemy itself is by definition only statable in terms of surface structure either in terms of same or of different forms. Even if we say it is intuitively perceived, we have to decide whether intuition is a kind of internal Sprachgefühl, or a capacity based on experience of the world, or intelligent guesswork about acceptability ratings. The last two of these possible explanations certainly involve utterances. If we look at intuition in production, we note a tendency for speakers to operate in terms of what they think they usually say and what they think they ought to say, both of which can conflict with what they actually say, which could be labelled 'data'. Labov (1962) claims that in areas of uncertainty, intuitive judgements seem less consistent than behaviour. That is, there is less consensus on the second of these than there is consistency in what is actually said. The fallacy of the structuralist was that a non-naive linguist could objectively analyse a naive informant's corpus, but the problem of intersubjective agreement is just as great in transformational and generative theories, since these naturally explore areas of interest where problems are greatest, hence where accept-ability criteria are more variable.

Thus it has been pointed out in many places in the literature that linguists frequently disagree about grammaticality. This is no trivial observation. The reason for the disagree-ment seems to lie in looking in the wrong direction, looking downward for underlying similarities and distinctions, before establishing what is actually happening out there where

utterances 'occur.'

It may in fact be no exaggeration to suggest that intuition procedures are rather similar to the prescriptive attitudes of earlier grammarians, since they are in fact norm-seeking. The norms are no longer those of the past, or representative of a search for purity, but they are still a search for the linguist's self-appointed norm, so that the sentences discussed in many linguists' grammars today are just as much the concoctions of linguists through intuition as they were in the old teaching grammars. This is not to say linguists should not be so engaged, but that they should admit to this element of concoction which is a part of their intuitive processes. The older teachers sought for bizarre sentences to exemplify the rules they taught. Today's linguists are equally capable of producing self-generated bizarre sentences which are not attested utterances in order to justify the rules they believe operate. Language in its most characteristic state is uttered without attention paid to its form, so that any method of producing sentence examples as data by introspection or meditation is bound thereby to introduce distortion.

Concerning the use by linguists of procedures we note Chomsky's early abandonment of the search for a simplicity metric for the evaluation of a grammar. However, an article from an unlikely source has recently sought to offer an empirical method for evaluating simplicity. Ferguson (1971) suggests that a study of phenomena such as adult baby-talk, telegrams, condescending modes of speech to foreigners and similar idiosyncratic forms which occur universally, might lead us to discover what native speakers regard as essentials in utterance forms for the purposes of successful relatively unambiguous communication. It soon becomes apparent that such things as difficulty and simplicity are really only measurable in psychological terms, that is, through empirical findings, no theory to date being adequate to handle the problem without circularity. If this is so, perhaps simplicity or complexity are basically subjective problems only solvable by interaction with data in terms of the notion of 'difficulty' which seems to be the performance equivalent of underlying complexity.

One important positive aspect of utterances as part of a grammar-generating procedure is that they represent a growing point in language. Linguistic competence is acquired in part by listening to performances, otherwise the postulated capacity could not function at all. Thus, though the idealized speaker-hearer may hypothesize about sentence structure, he cannot in practice escape the implications raised by the very existence of utterances in his environment, any more than a musician can avoid attending to the timbre of instruments. Though we may insist that the listener covertly 'follows' another speaker's competence grammar, when he

actually removes his attention from the message to the mode of its transmission (as linguists frequently do) he is then actually attending to performance features. Performance is not so much a competence distorted by lapses of attention as one modulated by concentrated attention. That is, competence is revealed most clearly when performance is most like it, and when linguistic attention is minimal. Pushed to its extreme, this suggests that the most naive speaker has no performance-competence dichotomy. Development in langue and changes in grammar occur only as performance adapts itself, or quite clearly the new forms could not spread. If innovation in parole is characteristic of linguistic competence, it seems as if innovation in langue belongs to performance. Either competence among speakers develops as the langue changes, or else language change does not represent any competence feature. By ignoring the utterance we arrive at an incomplete grammar.

The data in language is dynamic. However, it seems that linguistic intuitions are viewed by some linguists as logically systematic, rule-begetting and therefore static, perhaps even permanent. In practice, what is deviant today may well be tomorrow's norm. The fact that it is hard to think of examples does not necessarily reflect their rarity; it may reflect our inexperience and ignorance of what people actually say. One English example would be the attraction of personal to relative pronoun in utterances like: For we who originated this discussion, it is no easy matter. Our intuition might postulate a surface form using us, so that we would ignore this utterance or write it down as a deviant sentence.

In Austin's (1962) work there is discussion, in terms of illocutionary force, of the problem of distinguishing a question serving as a comment from a question serving as a question, and the latter from a statement serving as a question. Here too we see how disturbing it is to contemplate use or function in any theory of language. Though the phenomena Austin reports are well known, it is hard to fit them into a theory of sentences, as Ross tried to, since considerations of phonology may in certain cases influence the interpretation of the data. The possible ambiguity of all utterances on this score has led people to investigate underlying structures of the NP, to philosophize about existentialism and so on, yet the simplest way might be to investigate speaker-hearer interaction first.

In investigating the unknown, the linguist is forced to modify his intuitive approach. While there may be some sense in which he could possibly, though rather doubtfully, use a kind of universal intuition about language, he is in a field situation forced to invoke logic rather than tacit knowledge and to apply this to utterances. It is seldom possible in such circumstances to elicit intuitions from native speakers. Logical procedures cannot be used to

assess the grammaticality or otherwise of parts of his corpus, and he is thus forced to approach the task in terms of the formal qualities of that corpus.

Perhaps the main reason why theoretical linguists fight shy of utterances is that their goals are frequently only tenuously related to the study of languages. The distinction between an interest in arriving at grammars for languages and the search for universals in language is an important if obvious one, and at critical moments in their procedures linguists sometimes fail to observe a difference. The search for universals distracts attention from the value of language events as evidence in the quest, even if the main aim is to establish substantive types of universal.

What we have tried to show here is that the attempt to establish a grammar without the admission of certain utterance features as basic data means failing to account for the whole of the grammar. There are, besides the system imposed on the incoming data by the native speaker, certain perceptible systems which are recognizable in terms of the formal features of utterances. These include at least certain prosodic features, such as intonation and rhythm, certain externally manifested contextual dependencies, such as illocutionary force, and features of a certain range of abbreviated utterances.

There are also problems in intersubjective agreement about grammaticality which relate to lack of unanimity in identifying norms of competence, and there is the need to account for language change in terms of language events. Finally, the linguist must admit his inability to assess grammaticality in an unfamiliar language without recourse to actual utterance data. It is not only true, as both the theoretical and the field linguists saw, that a 1951 Harris-type non-semantic structural description is incapable of producing a grammar. We must go beyond the generative critics and integrate into the grammar overall sound patterns of utterances and their contextualizing features.

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