Functionalism Strikes Back

Talmy Givón

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Reviewed by D. Terence Langendoen

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This book is not without charm. We learn, for example, that Givón's interest in language evolution was prompted by his dog (p. 271). The book's major thrust is to disparage structuralist (chiefly generative-transformational) approaches to the study of language and to champion functionalist approaches (for example, the study of discourse functioning of expressions).

Givón attempts to discredit the results of structuralist thinking about language in a variety of ways. He suggests that the samples of language chosen by structuralists for study are artificial. He maintains that structuralists blatantly disregard data (Givón speaks of "the gutting of the data base" [p. 22]). He argues that by insisting on a strictly deductive formal model, structuralists are unable to explain anything more about language than what they put into their model in the first place. All these are familiar charges. What is perhaps special about their appearance here is the degree of vigor, enthusiasm, and confidence with which they are leveled.

In his foreword, Dwight Bolinger suggests that Givón is a well-qualified critic of generative grammar, since before he made "his leap away from the tunnel vision of so much of our contemporary formalism [he] had explored the tunnel, and knew it from end to end" (p. xi). However, the idea that an ongoing scientific enterprise can be viewed as a static domain (much less, a tunnel) that can be fully understood for once and forevermore is silly. Moreover, even if Givón once knew what generative grammar is all about, what he presents of it here is a caricature.

Givón characterizes generative grammar as a narrow study of a narrow selection of linguistic phenomena. What he fails to point out is that generative grammarians recognize that their study is only part of a larger whole and that many attempts have been and are continuing to be made to relate that study to studies of the other parts. Language is a complex phenomenon. In the face of its complexity, one's best hope for achieving understanding lies in adopting a divide-and-conquer strategy, in which various subdomains are selected out for investigation and the results of those studies then integrated. Chomsky pointed this out in *Syntactic Structures* (1957) in connection with the need for establishing levels of grammatical analysis. But it obviously also makes sense to isolate the study of grammar as a whole and then attempt to relate the results of purely grammatical investigation to the results of extragrammatical studies of language, for example, the study of the use of language in socially defined contexts. No responsible linguist has ever proposed that linguistic data that are not accounted for by a particular grammatical analysis should be simply "dismissed" or "ignored." For example, when Bever and I argued in our paper "Can a Not Unhappy Person Be Called a Not Sad One?" (in *A Festschrift for Morris Halle,* 1973) that phrases of the type *a not unhappy person* are ungrammatical in English, we did not dismiss the obvious fact that such phrases are acceptable to native speakers of English, but attempted to explain how such phrases could be understood by a language-processing mechanism that analyzed them in a way that is at variance with the grammar we proposed. Our analysis can, perhaps, be faulted, but certainly not on the grounds that we ignored relevant data.

Givón claims that generative grammar inherited from its structuralist ancestor the notion that "both the *method* and *object* of [linguistic] investigation [is] a *deductive* system, tight, formal, and logic-bound" (p. 352, emphasis his). As far as method is concerned, this claim is false, since the position that Givón attributes to generative grammarians is precisely the one that Chomsky rejected in chapter 6 of *Syntactic Structures* and the one that every other generative grammarian since has also rejected. On the other hand, Givón's claim that the object of linguistic (more precisely, grammatical) investigation is a formal deductive system is correct, but he goes on to say that the "inherent self-defeating nature of such an enterprise [namely, to determine what formal deductive system will generate a particular language] is too glaring to require further comment" (p. 352). I am afraid that further comment is required, because it is not obvious to me how the enterprise can be shown to be "self-defeating" in the manner, say, of attempting to assign a truth value to a paradoxical sentence.

Historically, functionalists have argued that structuralist explanations are

too narrow; and structuralists have replied that functionalist explanations are too naive. This dynamic can be nicely illustrated by considering Givón's discussion of cleft and *wh*-question constructions in English (pp. 217–218; 246). He dismisses purely structuralist explanations of their properties because they cannot account for the fact that the order of elements in those constructions contradicts the "universal pragmatic order" in which presupposed elements precede focused elements. Givón argues that only a functionalist explanation in which cleft and *wh*-question constructions are seen as deriving historically from paratactic constructions can account for the observed "violation." According to Givón's account, the cleft sentence *It was John who did it* derives historically from *It was John, the one who did it,* and the *wh*-question *Who did it?* derives historically from *Who was it, the one who did it?* However, Givón offers no evidence for this historical development and fails to consider any example, such as the cleft sentence *It's about time that you went home,* for which one might have some difficulty inventing the presumed paratactic source.

I do not recommend this book, except as a source of wonderment. I certainly do not agree with Bolinger's assessment that "beginners can be thankful to have it as a starting point, from which so many past mistakes have been left behind" (p. xi).