



Acknowledgments

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We may begin our inquiry into the study of SYNTAX¹ by asking what distinguishes a person whom we call fluent in a language, for example English, from one who is not. Fluency clearly involves being able, without noticeable difficulty, to produce (orally or in writing) and to comprehend (by listening or by reading) what are called the SENTENCES of that language. Fluency also involves being able to do these things for sentences that the individual has never before encountered, for we want to distinguish the truly fluent person from one who, like a parrot, has memorized a number of sentences of that language and is able to produce and comprehend just those sentences and no others. In other words, being fluent in a language means being creative in that language, creative not in the sense of artistic creativity but in the sense that one is able to construct or grasp the significance of objects that are totally new. Indeed, being fluent in a language is one of the bases upon which the construction of artistically creative objects of language, such as poems and novels, is founded.²

A LANGUAGE may be defined as the collection of sentences that a fluent person would be able to produce or comprehend had he the time, energy, and motivation. From this we conclude that a language is never totally manifested by any individual; in fact, the temporal, physical, and psychological limitations on him are such that in his lifetime he will have actually produced

¹Technical terms in linguistics and other terms that are used in special senses are introduced in small capitals. These terms, along with rudimentary definitions, will be found in the glossary at the end of the book.

²For further discussion of this point, see Chomsky (1966, pp. 17-18).

and comprehended only an infinitesimal part of his entire language. Moreover, not everything he will have produced in speech and writing or comprehended by listening and reading can be considered sentences of his language. For example, a person may begin speaking, but for some reason break off abruptly before he has finished a sentence. Similarly, many times when one writes, for example a memorandum or a grocery list, one does not write full sentences at all, but rather fragments of sentences and often just words.

At this point it should also be observed that what we are accustomed to think of as "languages," for example English, French, or Japanese, are not languages in the sense defined above. What we call English may be considered to be a family of languages having as many members as there are fluent speakers of what is agreed upon as English. The technical term for the language of a single fluent speaker is *IDIOLECT*; thus there are as many idiolects of English as there are speakers of English. Now, the differences between the idiolects of any two people from the same geographical area and of the same social standing are bound to be negligible in comparison to their similarities. Such persons will, on the whole, have no difficulties in understanding one another, for they speak the same *DIALECT*. However, two speakers of English from different geographical areas or of different social standing may readily discover that their languages are different and that although communication is generally possible, some difficulties in understanding what the other one is saying will arise rather frequently. In this case, we say that the two persons are speakers of different dialects. In general, a language such as English is divided along geographical and social lines into a large number of dialects.

To complicate the picture further, there are several dialects which have been singled out as constituting the *STANDARD LANGUAGE*. Certain of these dialects, which constitute what may be called spoken standard American English, are the only ones acceptable for use in national news broadcasting and for speaking in "polite" (or powerful) society in the United States. The standard language for writing in the United States exists in a number of varieties, two of which can be easily distinguished: formal and informal written standard American English.³ Spoken standard American English is learned in childhood by the majority of American children, but written standard American English almost always has to be learned in school. Thus written standard American English, and to a lesser extent spoken standard American English, are artificial; many of the criteria which are the

basis for determining whether or not particular sentences belong in them are upheld by decree from generation to generation by those who have attained the requisite social standing, and they have been committed to memory by most persons who have gone through school. Conformity to these criteria in both speech and writing is generally the mark of the individual who seeks social power or prestige. The person who has that power or prestige can sometimes afford to revert to his regional nonstandard dialect, at least in speaking.

Returning now to our considerations about the manifestation of language in speech and writing (from this point, the language under consideration will be spoken standard American English, to which we shall refer simply as English), we note that collecting specimens of what people actually say or write, while indeed useful for many purposes, will not lead us to form a very clear picture of what the sentences of English are, since first of all, not all these specimens will be sentences of English, and secondly, the number of sentences actually collected will not even begin to exhaust the totality of English sentences. Furthermore, this collection will tell us very little about the internal structures of English sentences.

In order to obtain information about English which will be useful for determining what are English sentences, and what are their internal structural properties, we require techniques of *ELICITATION*. Such techniques involve finding out the judgments that speakers of English make about *LINGUISTIC OBJECTS*⁴ that are presented to them. The most common form which elicitation takes is *INTROSPECTION*. Assuming that the linguist himself is a fluent speaker of English, he may inquire of himself as to what judgments he makes concerning a particular linguistic object. Quite naturally, he runs the risk of misrepresenting these judgments, particularly if the evidence he uncovers does not exactly fit with the rest of the material he has previously collected or examined. But every scientific methodology, even the most "objective," is subject to the same kind of misuse, so that introspection should not be ruled out as a viable technique for someone who rigorously maintains his honesty in his work.

Typical of the judgments that one can elicit are those concerning whether or not a particular linguistic object is or is not an English sentence; that is, whether or not it is *GRAMMATICAL* in English.⁵ Other judgments that one can elicit concern the internal structure of objects regarded as sentences, whether two

⁴By a linguistic object, we mean simply any string of words. It may be, but of course need not be, an English sentence.

⁵We shall use in this book the expression *E-GRAMMATICAL* to designate a sentence of standard American English. A linguistic object which is not a sentence of English will be called *E-UNGRAMMATICAL*.

³For a straightforward discussion of the varieties of written standard American English, see the Introduction to Watt (1967).

4 THE STUDY OF SYNTAX

or more sentences mean the same thing or not, or whether a particular sentence is subject to a variety of meaningful interpretations or not. Such judgments may be called LINGUISTIC INTUITIONS, and they constitute the raw linguistic data which the student of English syntax must use in his research. Accordingly, Chapter 2 is devoted to a brief investigation of the nature of linguistic data. One important point is that the judgments which constitute those data are more deeply founded than the well-known and explicit grammatical criteria of spoken standard American English found in handbooks of grammar. While it is correct to say that a person "knows" the bases of these judgments, since they can be elicited from him by questioning, he knows them only subconsciously, and if they are pointed out to him, he may evince considerable surprise.

In order to provide a conceptual framework in which to interpret linguistic data, the student of syntax requires a theory of grammar. Among other things, the theory should provide an explicit means of representing those linguistic objects which are found to be sentences of English; that representation, moreover, should include in it all the structural properties of those sentences. The theory should be serviceable as a model of how the language is represented in the mind of an individual, although it will not directly characterize how it is that people actually speak, comprehend, write, and read. Most importantly, the theory should indicate the many and profound ways in which all the languages of the world are similar, and how the languages of humans are different from the forms of communication among nonhumans. Chapter 3 provides the rudiments of such a theory, and an initial attempt is made there to represent some sentences of English using it.

A language serves as a means of communication. Therefore it is more than a system of arbitrarily connected symbols; each of its sentences conveys meaning. One of the tasks of the study of syntax is to determine precisely how it is that sentences convey meaning. This leads us to the study of the meaningfulness of words, and of their combination into sentences. Chapter 4 concerns itself with the nature of meaning. The same meaning, however, can be conveyed by a number of different sentences, while two sentences which look very much alike may be associated with two very different meanings. How this can come about is discussed in Chapter 5.

The last three chapters are concerned with inadequacies in the presentation of Chapters 3-5, particularly in the theory underlying these chapters. In Chapter 6, some modifications in that theory are introduced, and then an attempt is made to classify the sentences of English into a variety of types. Chapter 7 is concerned with some aspects of the relationship between the

grammatical structure of sentences and their expression in speech and writing. Finally, Chapter 8 inquires into some of the reasons why the structure of language is as it is, and concludes by providing an indication of the directions in which current research in English syntax is headed.⁶

⁶Quite recently a number of excellent introductions to general linguistics written from similar theoretical perspectives as this book have appeared. These include Bolinger (1968), Langacker (1968), and Lyons (1968).