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Abstract

Strengths and weaknesses of generative grammar are examined by an apologist for the traditionalists. Criticism is directed toward difficulties encountered by the layman in comprehending texts on linguistic theories, linguists' use of jargon and pet formulas, and unwieldy amounts of terminology constantly being developed. Special attention is directed to criticism of generative analysis, including division of clausal sentences, and concepts of kernel sentences and transformations. Linguistic problems raised by generative grammar are illustrated by frequent analysis of specific examples. A brief overview of the traditional, structural, and generative schools of grammar is presented with emphasis on their interrelationship and present trends. (AF)

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A Traditionalist Looks at Generative Grammar

RALPH B. LONG

THREE PRINCIPAL VARIETIES of grammar must be taken into account today: Traditional, Structural, and Generative. A cynical observer has remarked that nowadays those who concern themselves with linguistic analysis seem to have a deep emotional need for a flag to wave. Traditionalists are at a disadvantage here. We have no flag to wave —no catchwords, no mystique, no Mecca, no glamour. Many teachers of English equate Traditional grammar with the grammar generally taught in the schools, and quite rightly they feel limited respect for this. Naturally the "operators" in the profession go where the flags are being waved. To the increasingly powerful linguistic bureaucracy intrenched in government and organization offices, Traditional grammar seems downright un-American. Yet we Traditionalists still exist, and I rather think that we have less reason to be pessimistic about the possibility of continued academic survival than we had in the fifties when Paul Roberts, then the smoothest of the Structuralist textbook writers, dedicated to us an unsympathetic chapter entitled "Grammarian's Funeral."

A decade ago we Traditionalists found ourselves in the path of a Structuralist crusade that seemed likely to destroy us. Structuralists were "linguistic scientists," we Traditionalists were prescientific—as out of place in the second half of this century as Ptolemaic astronomy. The Structuralists were plagued by schism, but low-church Friesists and high-church Trager-Smithists united in viewing Traditionalists as enemies—wicked as well as unscientific—and where Structuralists got control Traditionalists had a hard time. The Structuralist crusade has now spent its force, and the Structuralist flags are neglected. Some of the most conspicuous Structuralists of a decade ago are no longer Structuralists. There seem to be two principal reasons for this state of affairs. First, in spite of unparalleled governmental and organizational support the Structuralists have not constructed a reasonably complete and reasonably defensible grammar of their own language, and seem less and less likely to do so. Second, the Generativists have demolished the theoretical basis of the Structuralist position. With neither an adequate grammar nor a defensible position in linguistic theory, the Structuralists now retain only their control of the linguistic bureaucracy and, through it, of most of what goes on in English as a second language.

It is clear to everyone who goes to the meetings and reads the journals that the initiative now lies with the Generativists. The Generativists have the same kind of energy and cohesiveness that the Structuralists had a decade ago. They have the same zeal also, and their shibboleths are as unmistakable as those of the Structuralists. The Generativists have Paul Roberts as a smooth textbook writer now, and he is apparently as determined as ever to bury us old-line Traditionalists. At the Miami meeting of

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the NCTE in November, 1962, Roberts said flatly that "the only kind of traditional grammar that we can be seriously concerned with at present is generative transform grammar"—which clearly means that the work of old-line Traditionalists can reasonably be ignored, now that fickle Truth has taken up residence among the Generativists.

It would be a mistake to look only at these surface phenomena. Generative grammar is good grammar. Thanks first to Zellig Harris and then to Noam Chomsky, it is grammar based in general linguistic theory of a high order. Traditionalists tend to be skeptical of general linguistic theory. To Traditionalists it seems that many general linguists are much too eager to fit English grammar into an interlingual mold that is not suitable for it. It does not seem wise to insist, as Hockett did in his *Course in Modern Linguistics* (1958), that even in contemporary English morphemes and not words are "the elementary building blocks of language in its grammatical aspect." How many speakers or even teachers, of English can immediately identify the morphemic components of words as immediately recognizable and as obviously divisible as *segregation*, *integration*, and *individual*? And is not morphemic analysis fundamentally different from syntactic and phonological analysis in having to give prominence to considerations of historical fact? Traditionalists have been especially skeptical of Structuralist linguistic theory because the inadequacy of the Structuralists' account of the grammar of their own language has made it seem unlikely that they could develop a general theory really applicable to all languages. But Generativist theory seems much less vulnerable. One can only hope that textbooks based on it will soon supplant the Structuralist texts at present commonly used in introductory courses in general linguistics.

Generativist papers and monographs on the grammar of English are of uniformly high quality. To name only one example of important Generativist work, Lees' *Grammar of English Nominalizations* (1960) is a model of the carefully done monograph we have needed all along in this field—comparable in thoroughness to Dwight Bolinger's important (and independent) *Interrogative Structures of American English* (1957). Generativists are now producing a greater number of first-rate papers and monographs on English grammar, I would say, than are Structuralists and Traditionalists together.

Nevertheless it is imperative that the profession not be rushed into hasty total acceptance of *any* linguistic package. What we need now is careful comparison, in conference and in the journals, of all the grammatical systems at present proposed. The Generative package is an attractive one: let us be thankful that it is available, but let us examine it closely too.

It we look at it critically, I believe we will decide that the characteristic Generative format and terminology are less than ideal, at least for use up to and through the master level. Generative formulas become very hard reading when they go beyond the simplest matters of analysis. One wonders whether many of the recent converts to Generativism have really followed Lees carefully through the intricate formulas which are frequent in his *Grammar of English Nominalization*. Lees himself, in his review of Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures in Language* (1957), said that "a valid grammatical statement is just as valid whether it is affirmed in an abstruse algebraic notation or in plain words." Apparently it is easier for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God than for a linguist to use plain words. Jargon on the one hand, formulas on the other: these are evidences

of linguistic scholarship, and they are also defe s, since not many of us are likely to go to the trouble of decoding them. Even hardened linguists suffer when they read each other's publications. A remark of Fred Householder's about the prose style affected by the Glossematists, in his review in *Language* (1963) of *Trends in European and American Linguistics*, 1930-1960, deserves quotation here. "Often," he says, "the pressure of time forces you to give up without having ascertained whether or not a passage has meaning at all." I would say too that Generative diagrams are not the best available. The broken-line diagrams presented in John Forsman's *Structure of the English Sentence* (1955) can reveal more about the structure of the sentences they deal with, and can be done on a typewriter. As for terminology, it presents vexing problems for all of us but the Generative solutions to these problems are, I would say, by no means the best ones possible. There is space to comment on only an example or two of unfortunate Generative terminology here. Neither "nominal" nor "noun phrase" is a good term to apply to subjects. In the sentence *well, George, last semester freshman-English papers made my life a shambles* there are a number of "nominals": *George, last semester, freshman, freshman English, freshman-English papers, my life,* and *a shambles.* What we must isolate at once is not a nominal but the subject—*freshman-English papers.* Subjects are sometimes quite unnominal in internal structure: for example, in *from San Juan to Miami is a thousand miles,* in *after five will be too late,* and in *once is enough.* The term "verb" also is used in highly undesirable ways in Generative publications. In the grammatical world most of us find ourselves working in, it simply will not do to call *found studying in the library* a verb. Verbs are items such as *find* and *study* and *segregate* that dictionaries list; mostly they are words, though tightly bound phrasal verbs such as *double-cross* probably must be recognized. *Found studying in the library* is a very different kind of thing.

Generative analysis also seems unsatisfactory at some points. Again there is space to comment on only a few examples. I myself would say that the initial division of clausal sentences into nominal and verb phrase is open to serious criticism. This is the school-grammar division of sentences into subjects and predicates: a messy business in sentences such as *naturally I speak to her*, and even in such sentences as *she never speaks to me* if we ask what "never" happens. When Generativists deal with the passive, they treat direct objects of transitive verbs as third items in subject-predicator-complement strings, not as parts of "verb phrases." It would seem simpler to take this view of them from the first. In *a local doctor owns the building* and *the building is owned by a local doctor*, certainly it is simplest to say that the first sentence is made up of three major components and that these are placed in reversed order in the second sentence and two of them are changed in internal form. The flat rule that all transitives can be made passive raises problems when such verbs as the *have* of *I have an impossible schedule* are taken into account, and Lees' solution of the problem by classifying such verbs as "middle" rather than as true transitives seems a little too ingenious. I would say that refusing to call *be* a verb raises more problems than it solves. It is responsible for Roberts, in his Generative *English Sentences* (1962), using *seem* as the basic copulative verb before adjectives and *become* before nouns, producing such specimen sentences as *the man seems angry* and *the boy became my friend*—and even deriving *an honest boy,* dis-

turbingly, from *the boy seems honest. Be* is so much like *seem* and *become* in its employment of distinctions in aspect, mode. tense, and person and number that refusing to classify it as a verb would complicate grammatical description at many points. *Be* even takes auxiliary *do* in imperative sentences such as *do be careful!* and *don't be so reckless.* Personally I question the desirability of regarding the *does* of *he doesn't live here, does he live here?* and *he certainly does live here* as primarily a carrier of the inflectional ending *s.* In her *Modern English Structures* (1962) Barbara Strang calls this *do* "a carrier of the negative particle or of interrogative order or of grammatical emphasis," and this seems to me a more accurate account of it. Person-and-number inflection is essentially vestigial in modern English, and even the past inflection of verbs, which would appear in auxiliary *did* if we put our three sentences into the past tense, is dispensed with for such verbs as *cut, hit,* and *spread.* I would say that the best analysis of *John found the boy studying in the library* would describe the sequence as a main declarative in which *John* is subject, *found* is predicator, *the boy* is complement, and *studying in the library* is an adjunct syntactically outside the subject-predicator-complement nucleus. *Studying in the library* I would call a gerundial clause, with subject suggested by the main complement *the boy;* in *John learned a lot studying in the library* the subject of *studying* is suggested by the main subject *John. Found studying in the library* is not a grammatical unit at all, I would say.

The concepts of kernel sentences and transformations are central in Generative grammar. Kernel sentences are, to quote Chomsky, "simple, declarative, active, with no complex verb or noun phrases"; other sentences either are transforms of kernel sentences or contain transforms of them, and are to be analyzed by tracing the transformations involved. This is an interesting view of sentence structure, but problems inevitably come up. All Generativists accept articles as parts of kernel nominals, or kernel noun phrases. Chomsky gives *John is my friend,* with a possessive determiner of *friend,* as a kernel sentence; and Roberts regards all determiners, including such words as *my, this* and *these, each, many,* and *much,* as among the parts of kernel nominals, though he ignores the use of possessives of nouns as determiners. Obviously *my car, this car* and *Jack's car* are as fully determined as *the car:* all are freely usable as subjects, as *new car* and *car* alone are not. In general, nondeterminative modifiers of nounal heads are excluded from kernels. Thus the *tall* of *the tall boy speaks French* is excluded from the kernel of this sentence, and is derived from the kernel sentence *the boy is tall.* Similarly *beside you,* in *the boy beside you is French,* would be excluded from the kernel of this sentence, I suppose, and derived from the kernel sentence *the boy is beside you.* The *with a green hat* of *the man with a green hat* can hardly be derived from the kernel sentence *the man is with a green hat;* Lees surmounts this hurdle by deriving *with a green hat* from *the man has a green hat.* Lees derives the *head* of *head lettuce* from *the lettuce is in a head,* and he derives the *bull* of *bull ring* from *the ring is for to fight bulls in the ring.* Actually some determiners can be derived as most adjectival modifiers of noun heads can. Thus the *many* of *many opportunities exist* can be derived from *opportunities are many.* Lees does derive possessive-noun determiners. Mostly, he says, they can be regarded as derived from sentences in which the verb *have* occurs, which would make *Jack's house* a transform of *Jack has the house.* In his paper for the

1958 Texas Conference on Problems of Linguistic Analysis in English, Chomsky gave such "adverbs" as *at three o'clock* and *in the house* as permissible components within the verb phrases of kernel sentences. Apparently these phrases would be inadmissible as parts of nominals—for example, in *the speech at three o'clock was a bore* and *the commotion in the house annoyed everyone*—but would be admissible as parts of predicates, as in *Phelps spoke at three o'clock* and *the children played in the house.* One wonders why the *at three o'clock* of *Phelps spoke at three o'clock* cannot be derived from *Phelps' speech was at three o'clock.* One wonders, too, whether the truest kernel sentences would not exclude both determiners and adjuncts of predicators. *Life exists, marriage is fun* (or *funny*), *children like dogs, people put work off*—these are genuinely minimal sequences. If we grant the inevitability of an egocentric view of the universe, *I am here* is minimal, though both *I* and *here,* like most proper nouns, have effective meaning only in particular contexts.

We cannot hope to find satisfactory derivations for everything that can be added to genuinely minimal sequences. Thus we can hardly derive the *the* of *the children* from *children are the,* and though we may be able to derive the *extremely* of *extremely dangerous* from *danger is extreme* we can hardly derive the *too* of *too dangerous* from *danger is too.* We should ask ourselves, then, just how much derivation of construction is really profitable. Traditionalists have known for a long time that transformational analysis helps in dealing with varieties of clause types, main and subordinate. Thus if we regard the italicized clauses in the following sentences as transforms of a basic main-declarative *Mary wears them at home* we can deal with their structure much more satisfactorily than if we do not.

Does Mary wear them at home? Those aren't the shoes *that Mary wears at home.* The shoes *Mary wears at home* are sensible enough. Mary bought them to *wear at home.*

We can certainly deal most conveniently with such a pair as *he has a wife to support* and *he has a wife to support him* if we begin by looking at the main declaratives corresponding to *support* and *support him* here: *he supports her* and *she supports him.* We can treat *weighing fifty pounds* in *the packages weighing fifty pounds* as a transform of *they weigh fifty pounds*—though it seems unwise to follow Lees in regarding it as derived from *which weigh fifty pounds,* which is simply another transform of *they weigh fifty pounds.* We can deal with passives most conveniently in terms of the corresponding actives. Thus *the doors are closed at six* is a true passive only when it is a reduced reversal of *someone closes the doors at six.* But derivation of construction is much like etymology in being a little apart from the central business of grammatical analysis, which is to describe the construction of the acceptable sentences we produce and presumably will continue to produce. It is hard to see that any real gain comes from deriving the *tall* of *the tall boy* from *the boy is tall. Tall* is still used in two characteristic ways, and each must still be dealt with. And is it really important to try to decide on a precise derivation for the *bull* of *bull ring,* of the *wedding* of *wedding ring,* or the *narcotics* of *narcotics ring,* or the *confidence* of *confidence man?* In each a head noun is modified by another noun; the semantic relations between modifiers and heads are varied, like those between subjects and predicators in such sentences as *she writes poetry,* where we have actor, action, and product, and *he dislikes poetry.* It is true, as James Sledd has said, that "as long as workouts are the order of

the day, unfamiliar gymnastics may actually be stimulating." Generativists are critical of Traditionalists who use the concept of transformation "so unsystematically that it loses much of its virtue," as Sledd phrases it. Nevertheless we must ask whether the search for derivations cannot be overdone, like the search for plus junctures—or that for "function words," which in *English for Today* (1962) leads to classifying the *born* of *where were you born?* as a function word along with words as grammatically miscellaneous as *this, and, please, early* and *for.*

Finally, we must not forget that the Generativists do not have a grammar that can be described as even relatively complete. Good Traditionalist grammars do map out the territory which genuinely complete grammars would describe in tremendously greater detail. Generativists have nothing that teachers can turn to for help with a multitude of recurring grammatical problems such as are raised in my *Structure Worksheets for Contemporary English* (1963). The Generativists are working on grammar, and working intelligently. My guess is that the most widely used grammars of the last quarter of this century will incorporate a great deal of the work of the Generativists. Actually the line between Traditionalists and Generativists is a relatively thin one and should disappear before very many years go by. If, as Roman Jakobson once said, proliferation of terminology is an academic children's disease, perhaps proliferation of cliques, which in this field take on the characteristics of sects, is a disorder of linguistic adolescence and so will not go on indefinitely. Traditional grammar and Generative grammar simply are not in basic conflict, as Roberts seems to imply when he includes Generative grammar within the tradition. Some of the goals of the Generativists strike me as admirable but not likely to be achieved in the foreseeable future. I do not expect to live to see a genuinely "explicit" grammar of contemporary English, going so far as to account for the unlikelihood of such phrasings as *asthmatic zinc* as Lees would have it do. If and when such a grammar is produced, certainly it will be enormous. The *Oxford Dictionary* will seem small alongside it. I wonder whether anyone can ever produce a grammar that will generate "all and only" the grammatical sentences of contemporary English. A decade ago I would have regarded the favored Generative phrasing "all and only" as ungrammatical, and even yet I would be a little appalled if a student of mine produced such a sentence as *I try to do all and only the things that interest me.* Is *the home of Abraham Lincoln* grammatical? *The home of my parents? The home of Judy?*

Grammar is doing pretty well now that the Generativists have the initiative. The Generativists are perhaps eighty percent right—this paper is devoted largely to the remaining twenty percent—and in English grammar *B* is a better grade than most of us deserve. We should all read the work of the Generativists with great care. But we should also keep up with serious work in the field done from other points of view. No single "theory of the language" can really account for all its tremendous complexity: it would be well for us to remember Sapir's remark that "the strong craving for a simple formula has been the undoing of linguists." And we should not forget that the relatively complete, and relatively defensible, grammars of modern English are still old-line Traditionalist. Teachers of English, and students too, need relatively complete grammars, somewhat as they need relatively complete dictionaries. They need them in the form of books of manageable size, which they can keep on their desks or carry around.

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