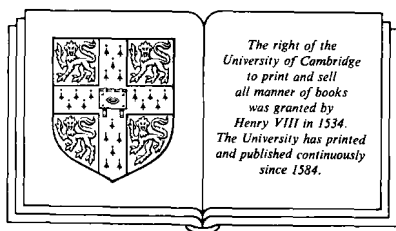# Natural syntax

Iconicity and erosion

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NATURAL SYN·

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Natural syntax

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Acknowledgements

The book is dedicated, with love and gratitude, to my mother, Emily Czitrom: *millió csókkal*.

Abbreviations

abs.	absolutive	ind.	indicative
acc.	accusative	inf.	infinitive
alter.it.	alternating iterative	int.	interrogative
ant.	anticipatory desinence	irreal.	irrealis
art.	article	loc.	locative
attr.adj.	attributive adjective	med.	medial
caus.	causative	neg.	negative
class.	classifier	obj.	object
comp.	complementizer	obj.foc.	object focus
conc.	concurrent	obl.	oblique
cond.	conditional	part.	particle
cont.	continuative	perf.	perfective
coord.	coordinating desinence	pl.	plural
count.	counterfactual	plpf.subj.	pluperfect subjunctive
dat.	dative	poss.	possessive
decl.	declarative	pred.adj.	predicate adjective
dem.	demonstrative	pres.	present
dl.	dual	prog.	progressive
DS	different subject	p.t.	potential topic
dur.	durative	refl.	reflexive
erg.	ergative	rel.	relative
exc.	exclusive	seq.	sequential
fam.	familiar	sg.	singular
fem.	feminine	SR	switch-reference
fut.	future	SS	same subject
gen.	genitive	sub.	subject
imp.	imperative	sub.des.	subordinating desinence
imperf.	imperfective	subj.	subjunctive
inc.	inclusive	trans.	transitive

Contents

Introduction

"... such prisoners would recognize as reality nothing but shadows ..."

Plato: *The republic*

"In the first place it was necessary to give up our consciousness of a non-existent immobility in space and recognize a motion not perceived by our senses; in the present case it is no less obligatory to give up a non-existent freedom and recognize a dependence which we do not perceive."

Tolstoy: *War and peace*

Two approaches to universals

Two pervasive myths underlie the philosophy of all the human sciences. The first, Plato's myth, asserts that things are not what they seem. The second, Tolstoy's, that social phenomena, like natural phenomena, have a life of their own, and are completely beyond our conscious perceptions.

Like all good myths, these simple concepts are not simply compatible with the facts of life: rather, they determine our understanding of what the facts of life may be.

While the essentially romantic appeal of such myths is undeniable, their empirical motivation is another matter. What I should like to do in the next several pages is to review some of the dogmas of linguistics which seem to me to reflect, in their pallid way, the myths of Plato and Tolstoy; and then to present a rather different set of ideas which are opposed to them.

Needless to say, neither Plato nor Tolstoy is ever invoked as an authority in linguistics. Yet the compatibility of some of our most fundamental assumptions with their myths should be readily apparent: and, to some extent, I think these assumptions are correct.

The sound spectrograph has demonstrated that things are truly not what they seem. We hear as "identical" certain utterances which from an objective acoustic standpoint are very different. On the other hand, no spectrograph, however fine, can identify such categories as the phonological segment or the syntactic phrase.

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Moreover, the laws of language which we refer to as "rules of grammar" have not been legislated by human beings. In fact, we are still unable to identify these laws, let alone control them. Language has a life of its own. But our assumptions go far beyond these observations.

Consider first the notion of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. In its crudest formulation, this principle asserts that there is nothing "X-like" about a word "X" in any given language. The word is not what it sounds like; and insofar as the word and its meaning are independent of each other, the word has a life of its own.

The linguistic relativity hypothesis may be viewed as an extension of the notion of arbitrariness. It asserts, first, that the categories of grammar do not correspond in their number or their extent with the categories of reality or experience; second, that the categories of the grammar of one language do not correspond to the categories of the grammar of any other language. Between the real world and our representations thereof lies an "intermediary world" of language: and, as human languages differ in their categories from one another, so too they must differ from the common world they describe, and from our common mental and sensory apparatus which perceives and imagines it. Once again, language, this intermediary world, is seen as having a life of its own.

While most linguists today do not accept the relativity hypothesis, most subscribe without question to a watered-down version of this hypothesis: the emic principle. In phonology, at least, the evidence in favor of this principle seems to be overwhelming: the class of sounds which speakers of a language perceive as identical is determined not (entirely) by the acoustic properties of the sound itself but (at least in part) by the essentially arbitrary way that a language will group different sounds together. The sound classifications which a language imposes on its speakers (as any foreign-language teacher can abundantly testify) is to a certain extent independent of reality. In phonology, then, the intermediary world of language has a life of its own.

Generative grammar has added two very significant ideas to this conceptual inventory of autonomous linguistics. The first is the distinction between deep and surface structures, and the second is the innateness hypothesis.

The distinction between deep and surface structure formalizes Plato's myth: things are not really what they seem. The innateness hypothesis amounts to the contention that the structure of language does not mirror the structure of the external world, but rather, independent properties of

the unconscious mind. Clearly, there is considerable evidence, some of a very detailed and specific nature, for both of these ideas.

Nevertheless, my purpose in what follows here is to indicate that these ideas are overstated. There are respects in which linguistic representations are exactly what they seem to be, and there are respects in which human languages are like diagrams of our perceptions of the world, corresponding with them as well (or as poorly) as other diagrams do in general.

The difference between the assumptions of post Saussurean linguistics and the viewpoint of the present book is primarily one of emphasis. That is, I will be presenting a range of uncontroversial facts whose validity may not be in question, but whose significance is presently discounted, simply because they do not support the myths of Plato or Tolstoy.

The general validity of the doctrine of arbitrariness is so obviously correct that it scarcely requires the authority of a Whitney (1875) or of a Saussure (1916) to establish it. We could even go further and inquire what similarity could possibly exist between a *sound* on the one hand, and any non-auditory phenomenon on the other.

Since the stated goal of this book is to challenge the monopoly of arbitrariness, I should emphasize from the outset that there are certain aspects of this doctrine which, for one reason or another, I will not challenge.

I shall not be looking for examples, however vivid, of onomatopoeia. As Saussure correctly pointed out, words like "moo" constitute only a negligible proportion of the words of any language.

Nor shall I try to demonstrate the pervasiveness of "sound symbolism", a constant correlation between submorphemic sounds and meanings: in spite of some suggestive evidence (Sapir 1929, Jespersen 1933, Swadesh 1971, Gregerson ms) to which I will briefly refer in chapter 2, I accept double articulation as an unchallengeable universal. In other words, words of similar sound will not necessarily be words of similar meaning: we should not expect, and do not find, semantic homogeneity among words like *pod*, *pot*, and *pox*.

A language consists, however, not only of an inventory of (admittedly) arbitrary roots, but of a system of grammatical rules for combining these roots to express complex concepts. This system of grammatical rules is our concern, as it is the concern of theoretical linguistics in general.

To what extent is the structure of this grammatical system an arbitrary one? Does it reflect the properties of the world or relatively independent properties of the human mind? When we talk about language universals

today, we almost invariably answer these questions in agreement with either Jakobson (particularly 1965) or Chomsky (for example 1972, 1980).

For Jakobson, as for Benveniste, Bolinger, Greenberg, and other writers who are somewhat out of fashion at the moment, many linguistic universals reflect, in a rather obvious way, our common perceptions about our world.

For example: other things being equal, the order of clauses in a narrative will correspond to the order of events that they describe. There is no language known in which stories are regularly told "backwards", with the narrative order being the reverse of the chronological order. Jakobson drew attention to the iconicity of Caesar's famous, and typical, *vēnī, vīdī, vīcī*, "I came, I saw, I conquered"; Eric Kellerman (ms) points out that the latter sequence is emphatically not synonymous with "I saw, I conquered, I came", which "receives a different, but no less iconic, interpretation".

Jakobson pointed out that the relationship in the cooccurring elements of a syntagm (Sentence 1 + Sentence 2) corresponds, in this well-known kind of structure, to the relationship of the events described in S1 and S2: sentences, like events, occur in time, and the medium of language is structurally adapted to the iconic display of temporal succession. This is Saussure's famous "linearity of the linguistic sign": we shall see later how languages may also iconically display simultaneity and temporal or conceptual symmetry.

Another famous example of iconicity, but this time involving paradigmatic rather than syntagmatic relationships between signs, is pointed out by Benveniste (1946). In a very large number of languages–but English is a conspicuous exception–there is a curious asymmetry in the expression of the third person singular, in both verbal and pronominal paradigms. While the first and second persons are typically represented by some personal affix, the third person singular very frequently is represented by zero. Consider the representative paradigms from Hungarian and Hua (the latter a Papuan language) shown in Table 1.

Table 1

	Verbal suffixes in Hungarian		Pronoun objects in Hua	
1sg.	lát-*ok*	"*I* see"	*d*-ge	"He sees *me*"
2sg.	lát-*sz*	"*You* see"	*k*-ge	"He sees *you*"
3sg.	lát-∅	"*He* } sees" "*She* }	∅-ge	"He sees { *him* { *her*

Benveniste argued that in such cases, the formal contrast between non-null and null forms reflected a conceptual contrast between non-third persons and the third person, a conceptual contrast which the traditional terminology of the Western linguistic tradition had obscured. For the Arab grammarians, the first person was *al-mutakallimu* "the speaker", the second person *al-muḥaṭābu*, "the hearer", but the third person, who did not participate in the speech act, was characterized as *al-ya'ibu* "the absent one". The non-person was iconically represented by a non-desinence.

A comparable example is Greenberg's famous universal: "there is no language in which the plural does not have some non-zero allomorphs, whereas there are languages where the singular is expressed only by zero" (1966:94). English conforms with this principle, illustrated in the contrast *dog* + $\emptyset$ (singular): *dog* + *s* (plural). Here again, a formal contrast between some X and zero is an icon of a conceptual contrast between less and more.

In Benveniste's and Greenberg's examples (and, to a lesser extent, in Jakobson's) we are dealing with statistical tendencies rather than ironclad immutable laws: a number of fortuitous tendencies, notably sound change, may obscure these patterns and result in paradigms in which the formal contrasts do not reflect the semantic or conceptual contrasts.

Nevertheless, there is good evidence, even in languages where the correlation between structure and meaning has been obscured, that this correlation has more than a fortuitous character. For there is a well-documented tendency to *restore* this correlation by a variety of different processes.

Watkins (1962) has demonstrated that in languages where the third person singular verbal affix is not null, it will be reinterpreted as null, with a consequent restructuring of the entire paradigm. In Swiss Vallader Romantsch, for example, the third person singular past definite ending was *-et*, added directly to the verb stem: thus, *chant-et* "he sang", *chant-aun* "they sang", and so forth. In the modern language, the erstwhile third person singular ending has been reinterpreted as a characteristic marker of the past tense, so that the same form *chantet* is analyzed as *chant* "sing" + *et* "past" + $\emptyset$ "3sg.". The reinterpretation leaves the third person singular form unchanged but has visible results in the rest of the paradigm, for example, in the new third person plural *chant* "sing" + *et* "past" + *and* "3pl.". The end result of such reinterpretations, of which Watkins gives many persuasive examples, is that the conceptual contrast between the third person singular and other persons is once more iconically reflected

in the formal contrast between the third person singular form and other forms.

Anttila (1972:194) draws attention to the restoration of iconicity through extensive *borrowing* when sound changes destroy Greenberg's universal. There was a time in the history of the Slavic languages when the most common ending of the (genitive) plural of masculine nouns (and that which distinguished them from the nominative singular) was the suffix *-ŭ*. When this vowel was lost by a general sound change, the genitive plural became identical with the nominative singular.

As Anttila reminds us, there is not a single Slavic language in which this situation has been permitted to endure. Rather, the denuded genitives of the major declension have been fleshed out with the non-null suffixes that were originally characteristic of the marginal declensions. Following Jakobson, Andersen (1980) points out that there has been a documented tendency in Russian to make *every* plural nominal desinence longer than the corresponding singular.

Jakobson's "Quest" article (1965) discovered an uncharted continent beneath our noses: a realm of the familiar, and yet profound, which current theory consistently ignores. At least part of the reason for this consistent disdain, it seems to me, is the immense, almost charismatic stature of one man: Noam Chomsky.

Over the last twenty-five years, there has been significant change in many of Chomsky's views on the organization of grammars; but on the nature of the interesting universals of human languages, it seems to me that Chomsky has been remarkably consistent. Scattered throughout his writings one can find the credo that

Our interpretation of the world is based in part on representational systems that derive from the structure of the mind itself and do not mirror in any direct way the form of things in the external world (1981:3).

No one could object to this viewpoint, enunciated here with charming diffidence. For a more uncompromising statement, however, compare his remarks in *Language and mind*:

Animal language . . . makes use of a fixed number of linguistic dimensions, each of which is associated with a particular non-linguistic dimension in such a way that selection of a point along the linguistic dimension determines and signals a certain point along the non-linguistic dimension . . . The mechanism and principle, however, are entirely different from those employed by human language . . . (1972:69).

Whether or not this is an accurate characterization of animal communication, I do not know. But I do not think it is quite as alien to human language as Chomsky maintains. And I do not think that Chomsky or his students are driven to his conclusion by the data they consider. Much more likely is the possibility that they are driven to their data by the assumption that the only interesting universals are those which seem to be arbitrary or pointless from a formal or functional point of view. Only these arbitrary universals can provide unambiguous evidence for a specifically human linguistic faculty which Chomsky has come to describe as an organ (cf. 1976:57, 1980 passim).

I should like to emphasize here that there is no way in which the doctrine of innateness is either supported or contradicted by anything in this book. That there is a human propensity for language is sufficiently confirmed by the observation that humans talk and other animals do not. The inventory of characteristics which distinguish human speech from birdsong or the bee dance is sufficiently extensive (cf. Benveniste 1952) without deep structure, the cycle, the empty category principle, or any other structural feature, to establish innateness.

Unlike some of his dismayed supporters, who chided him for his "abandonment" of deep structures (and thus, by tenuous implication, of the innateness hypothesis), Chomsky himself is perfectly aware of the independence of this hypothesis:

If, for example, empiricist or behaviorist theories of learning are unable to account for the acquisition of grammars constructed in accordance with the standard theory . . . then they fail for exactly the same reasons to account for the acquisition of grammars that submit both D[eep] and S[urface] structures to semantic interpretation (1980:158).

This, it seems to me, is absolutely correct. But it is an admission that there is no connection whatever between the putative structure of grammars and the innateness hypothesis. As Chomsky pointed out in his withering review of Skinner's *Verbal behavior* (Chomsky 1959), empiricist and behaviorist theories can account for the acquisition of no grammars at all. For this reason, it seems to me, invocations of innateness are totally irrelevant in arguments about the nature of a grammar. As Bernard Comrie has observed, innateness "is just a name given to the set of language universals and using this name should not blind us to the fact that a name is not an explanation" (Comrie 1980:24).

What *does* have a bearing on the discussion of arbitrariness and motivation, to a large extent, is simply the data that we choose to consider

interesting or significant. There is absolutely no way of predicting or legislating which properties of human language are the most significant. That our perceptions of significance are subject, in a large degree, to the influence of personalities and the whims of fashion, no one could possibly deny. For this reason, it is impossible to criticize generative grammarians, or people like myself, for their apparently tedious devotion to theories that derive their support from vanishingly diminutive amounts of data: the only question that matters, in the final analysis, is whether the theory is an "interesting" one. And this is a personal, and social, as well as a scientific matter.

I shall be arguing throughout this book that linguistic structures are often similar to non-linguistic diagrams of our thoughts, such that "selection of a point along the linguistic dimension determines and signals a certain point along the non-linguistic dimension". Arbitrariness creeps into languages as it does into diagrams in general. Wherever possible, I shall try to show that such arbitrariness arises not from totally novel and mysterious human genetic predispositions, but from relatively familiar principles such as economy, generalization, and association. These are principles that are responsible for the impairment of iconicity in diagrams generally, and are therefore relevant in semiotic domains other than that of spoken language.

Inevitably, to the extent that I am successful in my demonstrations and explanations, it will seem that I am reducing the conceptual gap between human language and other semiotic systems. I do not intend to deny that such a gap exists, however. Human language clearly differs from all other systems of (both human and animal) communication, if only in its richness and flexibility.

I do believe, however, that the motivation for a great deal of research in linguistics has caused (or been caused by) the equally mistaken impression that the conceptual gap between human languages and other symbolic systems is totally unbridgeable. Guided by the myths of Plato and Tolstoy, linguists have focussed on marginal and trivial facts which lend support to these myths, while ignoring or dismissing as insignificant vast areas of human language which do not argue so directly for the autonomy of our linguistic abilities.

Some of these areas I hope to explore in the present book. If I can persuade you that they are important and worthy of attention–linguistically significant, in fact–this will be more important, in the end, than the correctness of the explanations that I offer.