Grammar inside and outside the clause

(Some approaches to theory from the field)

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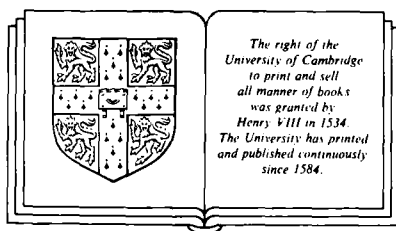## Some approaches to theory from the field

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Introduction

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The purpose of this collection is to present theoretically significant work on the syntax of the clause – writing arising from field work on languages with radically different clause organization from those that have informed most theoretical work in syntax. From these papers emerge both structural and functional advances: an improved understanding of grammatical relations and their cross-linguistic coding, hence an improved typology of clause structure; and a more sensitive functional basis for observed cross-linguistic variation in clause structure.

These advances are not simply the consequence of an exotic data base. They are the natural product of a perspective on linguistic theory growing out of descriptive work: an inductive, comparative, phenomenon-oriented approach which in our opinion has not been sufficiently articulated, although its discoveries and analyses have often been adopted by mainstream theory. This volume is intended to bring this approach into focus, make clear what it can contribute and has contributed, and, most importantly, to present work done in its terms in the vital area of clause organization.

Background

The theoretical mainstream in postwar Western linguistics includes a considerable variety of recognized frameworks, and shows a major internal division into structural (formal) vs. functional approaches. Nonetheless it is unified in sharing two fundamental properties. It is what can be called *model-oriented*: its goal is not so much to describe overt linguistic phenomena, but rather to develop an integrated explanatory model, whether of the speaker and what s/he knows, or of language as an instrument for communication and social interaction. Hence its research is properly focused on theory-internal constructs, and data is relevant only in so far as it bears crucially on the work of model building and testing. Linguistic output, texts, sentences, and behavior simply *reflect* deeper structural or functional principles.

What is less often recognized is that there exists another, fundamentally different (though logically complementary) mode of theoretical linguistics. The papers in this volume represent this second mode. Its scientific objective is to describe, not analytic and theoretical constructs, but linguistic phenomena themselves. This entails, first of all, attention to distinctions in function *and* in structure in the analysis of a particular language to a degree that might make the (respectively) model-oriented structuralist or functionalist uneasy. As well, it entails attention to cross-linguistic and typological generalization. It seeks to make generalizations about concrete phenomena in language: this form, with this function, will pattern in such and such a way in language. While not unwilling to reach for broad structural or functional generalizations, this approach gives priority to the more concrete generalizations as essential first steps.

This second theoretical mode has its origins in descriptive linguistics, a movement importantly shaped in the first half of the twentieth century by Boas, Sapir, and Bloomfield in the United States, and by European structuralists such as Trubetzkoy and Jakobson. Linguistic description as a practical enterprise received an enormous boost after the Second World War as European structural linguistics turned its attention to syntax and as generative-transformational grammar made syntax the focus of active theoretical research. Although the pioneering work concentrated largely on English, it made sophisticated syntactic description far more attainable, and provided terms in which universalistic hypotheses could be framed. In this context, and often frustrated by the degree to which typological findings were ignored during the early stages of generative grammar, many theoretically-oriented descriptive linguists became interested in formulating inductive, substantive syntactic universals. Greenberg's work on word order (1963) was a notable example of early success in this area; the inductive approach to universals was projected already by Bloomfield (1933: 20). In such an approach, a phenomenon – often unusual in some way – is noticed in the course of descriptive work in widely different languages, cases are collected and investigated, the notion is clarified, and eventually interpretations and explanations in broader, more comprehensive terms are debated. (This method contrasts with the approach to universals taken in much model-oriented work, where a proposal with wide-ranging consequences for particular grammars may be incorporated into universal grammar *in order* to test its viability.)

Let us look at two substantive areas in which this approach was demonstrated rather successfully. Both of them have to do with clause organization, and both have served as foundations to much of the work presented in this collection.

Ergative and other non-accusative systems of case marking

Since the nineteenth century it had been evident that ergativity presented problems for the views of subjecthood inherited from classical and traditional grammar. Breakthroughs came as the phenomenon was observed and compared in a wide range of languages. First, ergative case-marking schemes were found to correlate with such seemingly disparate phenomena as 'antipassive' voice constructions (Kurylowicz 1946; Jacobsen, this volume) and identity of transitive subject and possessor cases (Allen 1964; for a survey of correlates see Klimov 1973, 1977). Syntactic (categorial) ergativity was distinguished from morphological ergativity (Bergsland 1964, Dixon 1972), and shown to coexist in some cases with syntactic accusativity (Woodbury 1975). The historical evolution of particular ergative systems was reconstructed (Bergsland 1964; Silverstein 1977). Eventually the operationally useful notion of 'ergativity' was subordinated to general theories of the factors triggering ergativity in all grammars, central among these being Silverstein's theory of the nominal feature hierarchy (Silverstein 1976, Dixon 1979). The process of discovery thus began with descriptive work on particular languages and progressed to broad theoretical understanding.

Semantic vs. discourse factors in noun phrase marking

Although traditional grammarians were aware of many of the relevant categories and distinctions, their systematic and explicit formulation became possible only with the rise of formal grammar. Semantic roles were described by Fillmore (1968) and Gruber (1965). The Prague School worked on thematic structure and gave us many of our concepts and labels, arguably led to them by descriptive problems in the syntax of English, German, and Czech (among other languages). With this as background, descriptive linguists working on languages with prominent topic marking discovered phenomena such as switch reference (Jacobsen 1967) and topic chaining (Dixon 1972: Chs. 4–5). Both of these have been crucial in demonstrating the interrelatedness of clause linkage, discourse reference, and the expression of semantic roles, and at least to some extent these findings have been incorporated in current theoretical models. Recently and importantly, we see emphasis on the logical independence of semantic and discourse factors together with their cross-linguistic tendency to be coded together in grammatical relations. The work of Schachter (1977, 1978), growing out of descriptive problems in Tagalog and related languages, and the cross-linguistic work of Silverstein (1976) have been pioneering in this area.

In both examples, language-internal justification of analytical categories played a key role. The same phenomena could have been *handled* within a

model that assumed that a notion of subject operated throughout, as long as the model allowed sufficient abstraction from surface patterns. But the identification of more basic principles of clause organization underlying complex notions like 'subject', and their recognition in the overt grammatical apparatus of certain languages, was in these cases facilitated through the process of inductive generalization about specific phenomena.

Work in this second theoretical mode is clearly aimed at *substantive* universals. The two issues just mentioned seriously challenge the notion that substantive generalizations are of low value and have little overall impact on grammars. Neither involves isolated observations, but generalizations which have wide impact throughout every grammar. In our opinion the relative lack of interest in substantive universals in mainstream generative grammar can be traced to its focus on problems of language and mind. True formal universals are least susceptible to explanation in social or functional communicative terms, most susceptible to explanation in terms of the biological capacities of the human mind. Thus it is understandable that formal universals would hold the greatest interest, and substantive universals, whose explanation almost certainly lies beyond biology, the least. In contrast, workers in the second theoretical mode have been interested in the ways in which universal patterns in language may reflect not only biology and the structure of the mind, but also the nature of discourse and human social and linguistic interaction. Furthermore, they have been interested in the ways in which historical particulars affect what is *not* universal in language. Given such a catholic range of concerns, then, it is hardly surprising that cross-linguistic generalizations are regarded in this tradition as being of greater potential theoretical relevance than formal universals. We assume that this tendency is related to the commitment on the part of descriptive linguists to cover a wide range of phenomena in the languages (and sometimes societies) that they report on, including phenomena that bear on theoretical issues not currently being debated. The high regard for substantive universals is also a natural consequence of descriptive linguists' concern not only with issues of synchronic theory, but also with the reconstruction of linguistic history for the languages and societies they describe.

Concern with language change has in fact had a noticeable impact on some work in this mode. For the most part, little attention has been paid in mainstream syntactic work to statistically compelling tendencies in historical change, i.e., recurrent regularities of the form 'structure X tends to turn into structure Y'. Yet this is a major issue facing current theoretical linguistics. If syntactic variation is a matter of adjusting the parameters on a general theory of universal grammar, then observed adjustments of parameters over time in a language, or even over the course of the lifetime of an individual speaker, should account for and give insight into structural

relatedness. This is precisely what theoretical historical linguistics has not given us. Had the Prague School been able to develop a complete syntactic model, we might have expected from it an analysis based on principles for determining isofunctionality and an assumption that changes in abstract functional units determined changes in their material (and hence structural) manifestation; this is the approach taken, for example, in the phonological work of Jakobson. The literature on mechanisms of change (spurred by works like Kiparsky 1968, Andersen 1973) has made great progress in describing how change itself can be modeled. Current functional work may be expected to produce statements to the effect that isofunctionality favors formal merger or covariance. But all these approaches suffer from an assumption that change in languages is simply the reflex of change in formal systems, and hence adequately explained by a formal account of the change. (This is true regardless of whether the formal system purports to model the mind of the speaker or language as an instrument for communication.) The consequence is that no theory of language change purports to handle the strictly linguistic aspects of change: the question of what changes into what, and why. This follows from the devalued status of substantive generalizations in the model-oriented mode.

Finally, a hallmark of work in the second mode is its commitment to language-internal argumentation, to description in terms justifiable by facts of the language in question. It has been a favorite strategy in recent mainstream generative grammar (Chomsky 1981) to assume that an analysis necessitated by (a version of) universal grammar must be chosen over other possible analyses in languages where no *internal* evidence points to that analysis. While the usefulness of such a strategy as a heuristic should not be discounted, it is likely to prejudice data that would lead to inductive cross-linguistic generalizations about phenomena. Also, of course, descriptive linguists who feel responsible for presenting the original source material on a language are wary of making generalizations that go beyond the data: it is unlikely that anyone else would catch a spurious generalization and provide the clinching counterexamples, and readers would be likely to take such generalizations on faith.

For all the points of difference discussed, it nevertheless should be obvious that the two modes are in fact complementary. Phenomena discovered and interpreted along the lines we have described can be incorporated into theoretical models; and universals and trends discovered in the course of model construction (for example, island constraints) can be reinvestigated inductively, as phenomena. It should also be obvious that the distinction between the two modes discussed here cannot be reduced to the divisions by which we classify theoretical models. Thus in spite of the many points of unity in the approaches of the authors in this volume, some could be classified as formalists and some as functionalists, some as

generativists and some as descriptivists. The decision to compile this volume arose out of the conviction that papers like these were underrepresented in the theoretical literature, the unity of their approach overlooked, and the legitimacy of their role in the advancement of theory not articulated. In presenting this work we hope to contribute to the unification of linguistics. Despite the growing importance of typology to theory, there is a good deal of argument at cross purposes in the literature, prompted, we assume, by failure to realize that there is more than one legitimate approach to theory. We have identified the second mode not in order to advocate merger and not in order to discredit the other mode, but to foster the cross-fertilization that is crucial to further progress in linguistics.

Contents

Issues focused on in this volume are the definition of the clause, some aspects of the grammar and semantics of clause linkage, and functions of clause-level phenomena like grammatical relations, case, and voice.

The clause as a basic notion in grammar

The papers in this section examine the upper and lower limits of the clause, as well as its discreteness in texts: Foley and Olson examine the upper limits, Woodbury the lower limits, and Heath the text discreteness. Foley and Olson, and Woodbury are structurally oriented, showing that the clause can be distinguished from higher-level and lower-level entities in the languages they examine. Heath is functionally oriented, and finds less evidence for the clause as a grammatical unit in Ngandi, arguing that since its functions are carried out in other ways there is no need for crystalline clause forms on the surface. Underlying the differences in approach is a concern for adequate cross-linguistic typologies of both the functions and the structures of the clause. These three papers show how a commitment to describing a language in detail and on its own terms can yield challenges to and refinements of a standard theoretical and descriptive notion. What is important here is not so much the 'bottom line' – clearly Heath is less sanguine about the clause than the others are – but the *explication* of a notion which in many theoretical frameworks and many descriptions is merely operational and undefined, and the suggestion that it plays different roles in different grammatical systems.

Foley and Olson take up a range of constructions falling between two-clause and single-clause forms – verb serialization, where a sequence of two verbs in one or more respects meets the definition of a single clause in the language in question. The paper includes discussion of typological correlates of verb serialization, such as verb-medial word order and isolating word structure. The ability to explain such correlations is an

important test of the adequacy of a theory, a fact which shows the crucial role of typology in theoretical linguistics: explanations are not possible, and indeed questions cannot be posed, until a correlation has been seen as a correlation, which implicates the central heuristic importance of particular, especially revealing 'key' languages.

Woodbury examines the range of constructions falling between noun phrase and clause in Eskimo, where the two are conflated in the early literature because of superficial similarities to each other and to nominal sentences. While it may well be that no language can do without a noun – verb distinction, it remains a matter of some interest that there are languages like Eskimo in which NPs and clauses are so similar on the surface, and others, like English, where they are so dissimilar. Any adequate theory of cross-categorial syntax (such as X-bar syntax) must account for such situations. It must make clear that the nominal sentence, though relatively poorly attested, is available in universal grammar and bears specific similarities both to noun phrases and to clauses.

Heath raises questions about the notion of the clause as a universal (a kind of issue faced in a different way by Hale 1981). Heath's paper is a fitting transition to those that follow it, since its analysis of how clause functions are carried out implicates lower-level phenomena like linkage of propositions, case marking, and focus marking. It is the clause functions that motivate such phenomena. This of course does not mean that comparable structure (case, voice, etc.) will turn out to have the same functions across languages; on the contrary, functional requirements in other languages will in turn be shaped by what other resources are present in those languages. (See also, in this connection, Heath 1976, where a notion of antipassive is first defined in structural terms, then its different functions are determined for different languages.)

Clause linkage

The two papers here provide detailed studies of the semantics of certain clause-linkage types in two American Indian languages. An important recent observation has been that languages show ranges of clause-linkage types that can be arrayed according to the 'tightness' of their syntactic binding, i.e., the degree to which they are formally integrated by overt syntactic and morphological devices (Silverstein 1976: 162–4; Givón 1980; similarly, Foley 1976 for NP linkage). It is not at all clear that this is a unidimensional or linear hierarchy, and detailed local studies such as these provide some evidence that it is not.

Scollon's paper is concerned with showing the paradigmatic coherence in Chipewyan of a set of morphemes and constructions whose function is to link clauses. Part of his conclusion – that a structurally quite heterogeneous set of morphemes and processes have paradigmatic unity when analyzed in

terms of their function – might seem largely self-evident from the perspective of generative and other recent frameworks. This point is not so self-evident, however, in the frameworks in which much of the earlier work in Chipewyan, and American Indian linguistics generally, has been carried out, because of its strongly structural orientation. That is, generalizations were most vigorously sought about sets of forms that were defined in terms of formal features. Scollon's demonstration is thus of value in that it may convince traditional descriptivists that functional notions like clause linkage may be arrived at by a largely inductive method that adheres to the goal of describing a language in its own terms. In addition, this paper has the merit of justifying its functional syntactic notions, rather than assuming them *a priori* as is fairly standard. (In some instances, for example the notion of 'subject', the consequences of assuming a category rather than actually justifying it by close internal argumentation for the language in question can lead to quite unwelcome results, as is argued in this volume by Kibrik, Van Valin, and Dayley.)

Silverstein explores the meaning, use, and linguistic function of seven verb-of-saying lexemes in Chinookan myth texts, finding them to divide into two major classes, one episode-internal, portraying speech as situated in a larger context of interpersonal back-and-forth, and the other episode-bounding, in which speech is represented as more autonomous, expressive action. Because the text corpus on which this analysis is based consists so largely of stretches of quoted speech, such characterization of the verbs which frame these stretches gives important new insight into cohesion and disjunction above the sentence level in entire narratives. But the source of these conclusions is a careful examination of pairs of contiguous sentences in which the second contains a verb of saying, and it is there that Silverstein is able to develop notions of linkage that are relevant for syntactically separate clauses occurring together in discourse. At this level, Silverstein proposes a method that recognizes both the ways in which the forms under study *presuppose* (i.e., reflect) other structural, semantic, or pragmatic facts, and the ways in which they *entail* (i.e., create) new meaning or pragmatic force directly by their very use. For example, the choice between the two classes of verbs of saying to some degree reflects the coreference relations of their arguments to those of the preceding sentence, and the lexical content of the preceding finite verb. But it also can 'violate' predominant or 'unmarked' norms and thereby create new meanings in a new bounding of narrated interactional episodes.

In both Scollon's and Silverstein's papers an important feature is thus the analysis of *emergent linguistic categories*, that is, tendencies in discourse which are almost, but not quite, rigid and grammaticalized, and which, *were* they entirely rigid, would be recognizable for their similarity to grammatical patterns widely attested in *other* languages. For example,

Silverstein finds tendencies toward maintenance of coreferent subjects with one of his classes of verbs of saying, but switch of subject with the other. These are tendencies only. But they strongly resemble the rigid patterns found in languages which impose strict same- vs. switch-reference distinctions across clauses. (Similar observations could be made of Heath's paper.) The significance of emergent categories lies in the fact that they reveal, in the mechanics of discourse, motivations for patterns which we once knew only as fixed and seemingly arbitrary points of grammar. One might hypothesize that switch reference can arise historically from patterns 'suggested' by the meanings of certain verbs of saying, and then test the hypothesis for languages whose historical development we know or can infer on independent grounds. It is our impression that observations of emergent categories are a result of the careful attention to text and the awareness of grammaticalization that are a critical part of a field linguist's approach to grammar.

Functions of clause-level grammatical relations
Grammatical relations refers to the syntactic functions marked in some languages by cases, in some by cross-referencing verbal affixes, and in some by word order. This is a surface notion in essence, although deep or more abstract counterparts are often advanced to account for voice oppositions or to generalize over the NP functions referred to by syntactic rules such as equi or raising. Linguists of most theoretical persuasions would probably agree that all languages have grammatical relations and that the notion 'grammatical relation' is a cross-linguistically homogeneous one: particular grammatical relations – subject, object, etc. – exhibit considerable cross-linguistic variation, for example in pragmatic content, but the classificatory notion of grammatical relations as a kind of clause skeleton and a generic term for subject, object, etc. is universal and theory-independent. The next two sections of the book contain papers that challenge that understanding of grammatical relations. For example, Van Valin and Kibrik, in different ways, question the universality of a level of grammatical relations which encodes semantic roles; both show that in some languages there is no arguable difference between the roles and the grammatical relations that encode them, i.e., that their surface grammatical relations are exactly analogous to the semantic roles definable in other languages only at relatively abstract levels. From a different direction Merlan challenges the assumption that 'split-S' marking encodes a contrast in semantic roles or in verbal semantics, showing formal grammaticalization on the surface of relations entirely at variance with the notions of subject and direct object.

It has only recently become evident that grammatical relations contribute very different things to the grammars of different languages. One of

the greatest needs in today's linguistics is for careful, detailed accounts of just what grammatical relations and relation changes do for various languages, and these papers respond to that need. Van Valin describes a language (Lakhota) that uses grammatical relations exclusively as a direct signal of underlying roles. Merlan shows that an opposition thought to encode roles simply and directly does not actually do so. In many languages, grammatical relations constrain syntactic rules; Kibrik describes surprising diversity in the extent to which this is true, and the essential ergativity or accusativity of the constraining hierarchies, for a number of languages of the Caucasus. In yet other languages, grammatical relations signal discourse status as well as semantic roles; and the discourse oppositions involved may be productive and semantic, or obligatory, frozen into grammar and simply memorized by speakers. Whistler describes a system that has some productive and some frozen discourse properties. Rules changing grammatical relations have different structural and functional implications in different languages; Jacobsen and Dayley both demonstrate some of these.

In one way or another, each of these papers shows that analyses using models that incorporate traditional grammatical relations are too gross: a uniform cross-linguistic understanding of the nature of grammatical relations and their role in grammar complicates the description of Lakhota; a single characterization as syntactically ergative or accusative is highly inadequate for languages of the North Caucasus; a uniform account of the functions of voice oppositions will not work for Nootka or Mayan or Basque; the received semantic generalization about split-S marking does not work.

Functions of voice and other relation-changing processes

Jacobsen's paper is an influential 'underground' classic, presented in 1969. For mainstream Western linguistics it constitutes a discovery of the antipassive voice category (a term coined independently by Michael Silverstein in a paper of the same year dealing with Chinookan), although a number of the basic typological facts had been noted earlier by Kurylowicz (1946, 1949). Jacobsen's analysis is more complete than Kurylowicz's, presenting both mediopassive and agentive types where Kurylowicz shows only one. (It is the agentive that is now usually termed antipassive; the mediopassive would be termed a passive.) In its clear conceptual distinction of form and function, its demonstration that the two in fact coincide to a considerable extent, its distinction of syntactic from semantic subject-hood, and its explicit anti-linguocentric stance, this paper (like that of Kurylowicz) represents a level of sophistication that it took most other workers in the area nearly a decade to reach.

Dayley shows that Tzutujil makes a number of voice distinctions, both