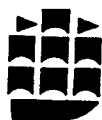*Fries*

THE
STRUCTURE
OF
ENGLISH

THE STRUCTURE

OF ENGLISH

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE

CONSTRUCTION OF ENGLISH SENTENCES

Charles Carpenter Fries

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND DIRECTOR
OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTITUTE
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

LONGMAN

Preface

The early plans for my *American English Grammar* [1] provided one chapter (later two chapters) for a treatment of the sentence. As the work progressed, however, two circumstances forced me to exclude the material on the sentence from that publication. The study of the sentence became too large to be treated satisfactorily in two chapters and was so steadily growing in bulk that only a separate book could handle what seemed absolutely essential. In addition, in spite of considerable progress, the study was not ready. The pressure of matters connected with defense and war, the problems of the teaching of English as a foreign language, made it undesirable to delay longer the publishing of the materials then practically finished. And thus the work on the sentence, although almost completely pushed aside, continued to grow. Only during the spring of 1948, thanks to a sabbatical leave, could the study be given the kind of consecutive concentration required for satisfactory writing.

In the meantime, however, beginning in 1946, it became possible to obtain an entirely different kind of evidence. Instead of the letters collected and studied for the *American English Grammar* I procured the means and the opportunity to record mechanically many conversations of speakers of Standard English in this North Central community of the United States. Altogether these me-

[1] Published as English Monograph No. 10 of the National Council of Teachers of English, 1940.

chanically recorded conversations amounted to something over 250,000 running words.

The materials here presented do not, as in the earlier book, center attention upon the "grammar of usage"—the problems of social class differences. Here the discussion deals primarily with the "grammar of structure"—the construction of our utterances—and offers an approach to the problems of "sentence analysis" that differs in point of view and in emphasis from the usual treatment of syntax.

Many matters have been excluded from this introduction. I have assumed that the morphemes have been identified, and have not touched the problems of the process of identification nor those of the establishing of lexical meanings. I have tried to center attention upon the results of my analysis of the evidence rather than upon the procedures of that analysis, and have sketched only briefly certain of the procedures. Throughout the presentation I have tried to stress the patterns of English structure and have sought in the evidence the frequently recurring "sames." Deviations from the frequently occurring patterns have been noted when they appeared in the material but I have not gone outside the limited body of my particular evidence to seek for possible exceptions. I have assumed that fifty hours of very diverse conversations by some three hundred different speakers would cover the basic matters of English structure. I hope that the generalizations made here will be regarded as summaries of the facts as they appear in my evidence and as tentative formulations for English practice in general.

One section of my study I have excluded from this book and plan to publish in a separate monograph, because it seemed to need more extended treatment than would fit the scope of this introduction. It is the material concerning the function words used with Class 2 words—the matters of "aspect," "tense" and "time" in English expressions.

One cannot produce a book dealing with language without being indebted to many who have earlier struggled with the problems and made great advances. To record all the sources of help and suggestions is always impossible. Like many others, I am very conscious of immeasurable stimulation and insight received from Leonard Bloomfield. Some particular contributions need more specific acknowledgment. Kenneth L. Pike's comments upon the first four chapters led me to include more fully the exact procedure of arriving at the units to be analyzed. He and Robert Lado and Yao Shen read the completed manuscript and offered many very helpful criticisms. Throughout all the long process of collecting the material, transcribing the discs, recording the instances, analyzing the evidence, and writing the manuscript, I have had the co-operation of the various members of my family and the patient help of my wife, Agnes Carswell Fries, whose devoted assistance made the work possible.

CHARLES C. FRIES

Ann Arbor, Michigan
April, 1951

C O N T E N T S

I. Introduction

The reader should know, first of all, that he will *not* find in this book the usual analysis of sentences that pupils have struggled with and the schools have taught for more than a hundred and fifty years. Modern scientific study has forced us to abandon many of the older commonly held views of language and has provided us with new principles and new assumptions which underlie new methods of analysis and verification. But the cultural lag in assimilating the results of this modern scientific study of language has been so great that the views and practices of a prescientific era still dominate the schools. That this is so in matters of language is not surprising, for, in many fields of human endeavor, belief and practice have clung to traditional and conventional procedures long after the scientific evidence was available upon which they should have been repudiated. In medicine, the practice of bleeding patients for many simple ailments rested upon a view of the nature of human blood and its function in the human body which stemmed from Galen and ancient Greece. In 1628, William Harvey published his great book proving the circulation of the blood, with all the evidence really necessary upon which to discard the general practice of bleeding. But bleeding as a medical procedure continued for more than two hundred years after Harvey's book. In fact, it was just about 170 years later that George Washington was bled heavily four times in one night as a treatment for his quinsy. With our increased understanding of the nature of human blood,

great blood banks have been created from which new life has been put *into* the veins of many patients. The lag in the social acceptance of linguistic advances has been nearly as great.

The linguistic approach adopted here will differ, therefore, from that made familiar by the common school grammars, for it is an attempt to apply more fully, in this study of sentence structure, some of the principles underlying the modern scientific study of language. This different approach is not difficult in itself but it may at first be somewhat confusing to those whose thinking in linguistic matters has been channeled by the traditional methods and materials of grammatical study. Even the well-known definitions of the sentence and its parts must be forgotten if the terms themselves are to be retained. The reader will certainly be confused if he constantly seeks to translate the statements he finds here into the old grammatical terms as he has customarily defined them and as he has employed them in practice. He must *not* conclude that the approach here is simply or primarily a new set of terms for the same old grammatical materials. As a matter of fact, in order to avoid some possible confusion, technical terms of all kinds are avoided wherever possible, and longer, more cumbersome descriptive statements often used in their stead. The difference between the approach used here and the older approach lies much deeper than a mere matter of terminology; it rests primarily upon a fundamentally different view of the nature of "grammar"—a view that has given tremendous enthusiasm to students of the "new" grammar and fresh hope that the results of their study will become increasingly useful for insight into the nature and functioning of language.

The many different values claimed for the traditional study and analysis of sentences in the schools have each been challenged during the past fifty years, and the amount of time devoted to "grammar" in this sense has fluctuated greatly as the advocates or adversaries of "grammar" have held power. Too often those

who have opposed the conventional grammar analysis have had nothing to offer as a substitute, and no practical suggestions as to how an understanding of the mechanism of our language must be gained.[1] This book tries to provide the fundamental descriptive analysis upon which such practical textbooks can be built. The study presented here attempted an analysis of a large body of actual English speech observed and recorded in a university community in the North-Central part of the United States. It is, frankly, as its title indicates, an *introduction* to the structure of English utterances—not a complete descriptive treatment of all the features of that structure. The range of the precise topics discussed appears in the table of contents. This introduction is offered in the hope that it will provide the stimulation and perhaps the basis for the many additional studies of present-day English that we need.

The point of view in this discussion is descriptive, not normative or legislative. The reader will find here, *not* how certain teachers or textbook writers or "authorities" think native speakers of English ought to use the language, but how certain native speakers actually do use it in natural, practical conversations carrying on the various activities of a community. The materials which furnished the linguistic evidence for the analysis and discussions of the book were primarily some fifty hours of mechanically recorded conversations on a great range of topics—conversations in which the participants were entirely unaware that their speech was being recorded. These mechanical records were transcribed for convenient study, and roughly indexed so as to facilitate reference to the original discs recording the actual speech.[2] The treatment here

[1] There have of course been some, as for example, Otto Jespersen's *Analytic Syntax* (Copenhagen, 1937).

[2] With the recent development of mechanical devices for the easy recording of the speech of persons in all types of situations there seems to be little excuse for the use of linguistic material not taken from actual communicative practice when one attempts to deal with a living language. Even though the investigator is himself a native

is thus also limited by the fact that it is based upon this circumscribed body of material.

Often linguistic students are censured for devoting themselves to the "language of the people" rather than to the language of "great literature." Perhaps a misunderstanding of the precise task of the linguist underlies these criticisms. A linguist usually is concerned with finding out how a language works in fulfilling all the functions of communication in the particular social group that uses it. "Great literature" is only one of those functions and on the whole a very limited one comparatively. It is comparable in a way to the hothouse plants and flowers developed by the florist. The practices of the florist in creating especially beautiful specimens, as well as the work of a Burbank in producing seedless oranges or seedless raisins, rest upon an understanding of the nature of these plants as the scientific botanist reveals it. For the botanist's work, the plants as they occur in nature furnish a more satisfactory basis for study and investigation than do the specially developed, more beautiful specimens of the florist's hothouse or the cultivated garden. The scientific linguist doesn't attempt to investigate the creation of great literature; he has devoted himself to the difficult task of discovering and describing the intricate and complicated mechanisms which the language actually uses in fulfilling its communicative function and which the literary artist also must take as basic in his expression. As a scientist the linguist is searching for pure knowledge. To know the facts and to understand the language processes are to him ends in themselves. He usually leaves to others the business of applying practically the knowledge he has won. The fact that his particular task first

---

speaker of the language and a sophisticated and trained observer he cannot depend completely on himself as an informant and use introspection as his sole source of material. He has a much more satisfactory base from which to proceed with linguistic analysis if he has a large body of mechanically recorded language which he can hear repeated over and over, and which he can approach with more objectivity than he can that which he furnishes from himself as informant.

takes him to the language of the people as used in the practical affairs of life rather than to the creations of literature does not mean that he is hostile to literature nor that he ignores literature.[3]

For the linguist, the continuation of older forms in the language of the uneducated is an important fact of language history—just as important as the changes made in the language of the socially accepted. The particular areas of use of differences of language practice, geographical as well as social class differences, are important matters of his study, for language forms communicate not only their denotative meanings but also the connotative suggestions of the usual circumstances of their use. A linguist records and studies all the actual forms and uses of the language that occur, but that recording and that study, of Vulgar English as well as of Standard English, *should certainly not be taken as evidence that he therefore recommends or believes that the forms of Vulgar English can or should be substituted for the forms of Standard English.* If he is a good linguist he is very careful to note the precise areas of use in which the language forms are recorded, and he understands the problems of trying to learn to substitute the forms of one "dialect" for another. He understands, perhaps more completely than others, the nature of the task that the schools have undertaken when they assume the burden of teaching every child to use Standard English and, accordingly, he sometimes urges the limitation of that teaching to the actual forms of Standard English, as a scientific description reveals them, and the abandoning of attempts to teach forms that do not occur in the actual speech of native speakers of Standard English, forms that have become shibboleths of the classroom.

Unfortunately this insistence upon examining the actual facts of

[3] This does not mean that the language materials used in great literature do not interest the scientific linguist nor that his techniques and principles should not be exploited in the study of certain literary problems, especially such problems as those of style and literary form.

usage, as a starting point from which to proceed to clear a crowded teaching program of matters that can safely be ignored, has aroused considerable opposition from those who do not understand the point of view of the linguist. They interpret the issue as a struggle of radicals against conservatives. The conservatives, they believe, stand for "correctness," and they urge that "it is the part of the schools to teach the language strictly according to the rules . . . rather than to encourage questionable liberties of usage."[4] The radicals, on the other hand, are thought of as those who would follow an easier path and accept all sorts of "errors" whenever these "errors" are widespread—a policy which the "conservatives" believe would undermine the defenses against the "wretched English heard everywhere" and allow the floods of crudity to wipe out all accuracy of expression and sensitivity to elegance. Thus these two names, "conservative" and "radical," have for some become the two extremes of a scale by which to classify those who discuss language questions. The linguistic scientist is usually placed well to the left and called a radical or a liberal. If, however, a conservative in language matters is one who insists upon noting with precision all the varied circumstances surrounding the use of language forms and insists upon employing these forms with all the accuracy which they allow, and if a liberal or radical in language matters is one for whom in practical use "one form is as good as another" just as long as the gross meaning is understood, or if a liberal is one who believes that "if a language form is used *anywhere*, it is all right to use it *everywhere*"—then the scientific linguist is *not* a liberal but must be classed as an ultraconservative. If, on the other hand, a conservative is one who believes that accuracy and precision of language are to be measured by the rules of the common school grammars and the handbooks, and if a liberal or radical is one who turns away from authoritarian rules to the modern techniques of historical linguistics, of lin-

[4] *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), February 23, 1921.

guistic geography, and of descriptive analysis, as a means of understanding the significance of language phenomena, then the linguist *is* a complete liberal or radical.

Too often, it is true, the linguistic materials upon which teachers should build are presented in a form and in a language quite specialized and remote from that of educated laymen. Perhaps the solution is for more teachers to try to understand the scientific work in linguistics and for more linguists to try to write so that they may be more widely understood.

This book is addressed, in its form of expression, not primarily to the specialist in linguistic analysis, but to the educated lay reader who is interested in learning something about how the English language accomplishes its communicative function—about the mechanism of its utterances. Educated lay readers include the teachers in our schools and colleges—teachers in general, as well as those who must deal with the English language in particular, and those who attempt to teach foreign languages to students whose native language is English. In writing, therefore, I have tried to use explanations and illustrations, and terms, that will attach to the common experience of these educated laymen. Most of the examples appear in the conventional spelling, in spite of the difficulties this may incur, because the use of even simplified phonemic notation would probably put the book beyond the patience of many lay readers.

It is my hope, however, that the linguistic specialist will not, because of this attempt to address the educated layman, impatiently discard the book with a hasty skimming, assuming that it is merely a popularization of well-known materials, and miss my effort not only to challenge anew the conventional use of "meaning" as the basic tool of analysis in the area of linguistic study in which it has had its strongest hold—sentence structure and syntax [5]

[5] Otto Jespersen insists, for example, "But in syntax meaning is everything." *A Modern English Grammar* (Heidelberg, 1931), IV, 291.

—but also to illustrate the use of procedures that assume that all the signals of structure are formal matters that can be described in physical terms.[6]

Throughout the whole study I have tried to free myself from the channeling of traditional thinking about the sentence and to view the facts of the language as freshly as possible, in terms of the assumptions under which the work is done. It is not to be expected that I have succeeded at all points. I have, however, tried to state the special assumptions underlying the approach and enough of my step-by-step procedure to make possible the checking of the results obtained here, as well as to reveal the weaknesses that must exist.

[6] This challenge of the conventional use of *meaning as the basic tool of analysis* must not lead to the conclusion that I have ignored meaning as such, nor that I deny that the chief business of language is to communicate meanings of various kinds, and that the linguistic student must constantly deal with meanings. "To put it briefly, in human speech, different sounds have different meanings. To study this co-ordination of certain sounds with certain meanings is to study language" (Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* [New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1933], p. 27).

It does mean, however, that in the study of sentence structure I believe certain uses of meaning constitute an unscientific procedure and have not led to satisfactory, fruitful results. As a general principle I would insist that, in linguistic study and analysis, any use of meaning is unscientific whenever the fact of our knowing the meaning leads us to stop short of finding the precise formal signals that operate to convey that meaning.

On the other hand, this study assumes that we must control enough of the meaning of the utterances examined, that we can get from an informant (ourselves as native speakers of the language, or others) such a response as to determine whether any two items are the "same" in a particular aspect of meaning or "different." See the discussion in Chapter IV, and footnote 7 in Chapter V (p. 75).

II. What Is a Sentence?

More than two hundred different definitions of the sentence confront the worker who undertakes to deal with the structure of English utterances. The common school grammars continue to repeat the familiar definition, "A sentence is a group of words expressing a complete thought," although this ancient definition (which antedates Priscian c. 500 A.D.) quite evidently does not furnish a workable set of criteria by which to recognize sentences. In actual practice we often ignore the definition with its "complete thought" as a criterion. If, for example, a reader attempts to count the number of sentences that occur on this or any other page of print, he usually does not stop to decide whether each group counted expresses a "complete thought." In fact he may not read a single word of the material nor even attempt to discover what the discourse is about. He simply gives attention to the marks of end punctuation and to the capital letters with which, in our conventions of writing, we begin sentences. The practical definition used to count the number of sentences in any written material would thus be phrased as follows: A sentence is a word or group of words standing between an initial capital letter and a mark of end punctuation or between two marks of end punctuation.

The student, however, very often finds his writing condemned because of his "sentence fragments" and "comma splices." His teachers insist that the groups of words he has marked with capital

letters at the beginning and periods at the end are not "sentences" in that they do not contain a "thought." Sometimes they insist that these marks for the boundaries of some sentences include too much material for one sentence and should therefore be changed to indicate the several "sentence" thoughts "spliced" together in the larger group. Sometimes they insist that the word groups marked off with the signs of "end" punctuation, although they are not "sentence fragments" as such, in that they do contain a "thought," still are "insignificant" sentences, and need to be joined in order to make a "complete" thought.

To remedy such pupil practices teachers give their students vague admonitions to develop "a sentence sense" and "to feel out" the sentences they have written in order to determine "whether the thought is complete or not."

> The best way to tell whether our sentences are complete or not is to "feel them out." Incomplete sentences do not make sense. . . . It is really not difficult to tell a fragment from a complete sentence. We seem to "feel" instinctively when a thought is stated completely. . . . Another very common error in pupils' themes is the "comma splice" . . . they sometimes join two of their sentences together with a comma. If you have learned to "feel out" the complete sentence unit, you will not be likely to make this error. . . . The best way to find such errors is to read one's own sentences aloud "feeling" carefully whether the thought is complete or not.[1]

If the following paragraph is read aloud with normal intonation to a group of teachers, and these teachers are asked to record simply the number of sentence units to be marked by the punctuation, there will be considerable disagreement. Usually with a dozen or more teachers the count will vary surprisingly; every number from three to nine will be indicated.

[1] F. G. Walcott, C. D. Thorpe, and S. P. Savage, *Growth in Thought and Expression* (Chicago: Benjamin H. Sanborn and Co., 1940), II, 31, 32, 35, 37.