Barbara M. H. Strang

Modern
English
Structure

Modern English Structure

by

BARBARA M. H. STRANG

Lecturer in English
King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

First published 1962

Introduction

The need has long been felt for an introductory textbook on the study of English which shall be useful to elementary students without offending against the standards of professional linguists. Perhaps everyone who tries to teach on these lines feels the necessity of writing his own course and will be dissatisfied with anyone else's. At any rate, I know I am not alone in my discontent with anything currently available.

Some choice of method and terminology is always open to a grammarian, and I realise that what I have written is open to theoretical objection on the grounds of its conformity with tradition. I believe it is good for an elementary textbook of a student's own vernacular to bring out the distinctive character of the language not in terms solely applicable to it, but as far as possible in terms which will serve for, and enable him to effect comparisons with, at least those cognate languages he is most likely to be acquainted with. That is, I do not think it right, *for this purpose*, to discuss, for instance, whether English has nouns or not, but rather how the term *noun* can most revealingly be defined in the study of English. It is this principle which has guided my choice of methods and terms, and has even contributed to my notion of what is the available range of choice.

I have spoken of a particular purpose, and would like to define it more closely. It is to give the elementary student an awareness of the mechanisms of his own language through descriptive analysis. By elementary student I mean principally the pass or general degree student at a university, but I hope the work will also have some use for the sixth-former, the training-college student, and even the honours student of English who is not a linguistic specialist.

I do not believe there is such a thing as finality in the description of a language—certainly not of a living language. A textbook presentation of the subject is *a fortiori* provisional. But more than this inevitable evanescence attaches to any work on English grammar published in anticipation of Professor Randolph Quirk's projected *Survey of Educated Spoken English*. For that, however, we have to wait a decade, and it will be longer before derivative textbooks can appear. In the near future, very great theoretical advances in methods of linguistic description are expected, but this has been the position throughout my life so far and (I would almost say 'I trust') will stay so for the remainder of it. Meanwhile, the necessity of putting something into the hands of teachers and students is desperate, and this is the sole justification of the present work. It hopes to be no more than an interim measure. I am

v

appalled by the frequency with which I have to say that the facts about a given usage are simply not known (analytically known, that is). But there are many reaches of English structure concerning which a clear statement of ignorance would be a step forward.

Every chapter is provided with exercises, though many teachers will prefer to devise their own. It is unfortunate that though the substance of the book emphasises spoken English, the material of the exercises has to be drawn not from real speech, but from literary sources, and I would like to make two suggestions in this connection. First, I should be sorry if anyone conducted a course on *Modern English Structure* without considering the tape-recorder as essential a piece of equipment as the textbook. Second, the book is conducted as if it were a class in which all participate; the *we's* throughout it are emphatically not editorial. If a group of people work through the book as a team, and keep the tape-recorder on during their discussions, they will be providing themselves with material for analysis far more rewarding than anything I can offer.

References are given throughout by author and year of publication; full details of the publications referred to are given in the bibliography.

I hope that my indebtedness to general linguists, phoneticians, and recent writers on the structure of English will be clear from the references in my text; what may not emerge so boldly is a more indirect, but very great, debt to the work of the great observers of the detail of English usage, from Henry Sweet through Otto Jespersen, G. O. Curme, H. Poutsma, H. E. Palmer, E. Kruisinga and P. A. Erades, to R. W. Zandvoort. The Linguistics Association has provided a forum for discussion from which I have benefited in many ways; amongst its members I am aware of a special obligation to Professor Randolph Quirk, Dr. M. A. K. Halliday, and Messrs. J. C. Catford, John Sinclair and W. Haas, some of whom have allowed me to refer to their unpublished work. The Council of King's College, Newcastle upon Tyne, allowed me study leave during the Michaelmas Term, 1961, and this enabled me to complete the book much more quickly, and much less incoherently, than I could otherwise have done. Professor Peter Ure and my colleagues in the Department of English, especially Dr. Angus Macdonald, were so accommodating as to make possible the rearrangement of my teaching so that I could take up the grant of study leave. Though I fear they did not suspect it at the time, several generations of undergraduates have been teaching me what little I know about how to put across linguistic material to people whose central interests lie elsewhere. The staff of the University Library, King's College, have been unfailingly helpful. My sister-in-law Jean Strang and Miss K. O'Rawe have provided skilled secretarial help. Mrs. Jean Bone has spent much time checking the typescript. My colleague, Mr. James

Maxwell, has had the outstanding kindness to go through the entire typescript and has made many acute comments and corrections; he, like others too numerous to mention, has provided references for interesting usages and illuminating discussion of matters I wished to treat.   My most overwhelming debt is to my husband, Colin Strang; I could not begin to formulate or acknowledge it in its totality, but I should like to record that it includes both a corrective element, directing attention to obscurities of expression and inconsistencies of thought, and a creative one—the seeking out of examples and the formulating of neat analyses of complex data.   A meticulous examination of the whole typescript is only the final round of his contribution to the book.

Newcastle,
March, 1962

Acknowledgements

Contents

viii

The Nature of Language

§1. Language is so much taken for granted as a component of normal human experience that we characterise as infancy ('being without speech') the only stage in our lives when experience is not saturated with language. Many people do not reflect on the part language plays in their lives, but most people pay tribute to it by taking some interest in questions about its origins, development and correct use. They are as ready to ask how the armadillo got his name as how the elephant got his trunk, and equally ready to listen to stories in answer to both questions. This book is about the most general aspects of how English works, but much that is true of English is true of it simply because it is a language and because it is language. For that reason we may start by considering some questions about language in general.

§2. One of the questions people do not very readily ask about language is what it is. By and large, for practical purposes, they know—that is, they know in general how to recognise an example of it when they meet one. Even at this level there are difficulties. For instance, we talk about *the language of mathematics* or *music* or *the dance*, but if a foreigner who did not talk English asked us to point out examples by which he could learn the meaning of the word *language* we would not show him a sum or a samba. If he asked about, say, *the language of music*, we could refer him in general terms to the practice of extending meanings figuratively, and we could show that the extension is secondary because if he knows what is meant by *language* he will understand its use in *the language of music*, but the converse is not true. A more serious difficulty arises when we have to face expressions like *the language of bees*. This might, like our first difficulty, be resolvable by reference to some notion of figurative meaning, but the question is precisely whether the expression is figurative or not—that is, whether it can be used because of some significant but partial similarity between what we ordinarily call language and bee-communication, or whether they are so alike as to fall under the same definition. There are two problems: we have first to think out what we regard as essential to language and then to ask whether this is found in the signalling system of bees.

1+

Now there have already been countless definitions of *language*; the truth is that the semantic spread of the word in ordinary usage is so great that any manageable definition will leave out or distort something. I do not believe that what we need in this book is yet another definition, but rather a working account or description that will bring out those characteristics most important to our understanding of how language functions.

Note

For interest, I append three definitions of language that have something like classic standing. I do not discuss them, but their value should be pondered in the light of what follows in this chapter:

(1) From the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforward referred to as *OED.*) the relevant sense is 2, 'Words and the methods of combining them for the expression of thought.'
(2) Jespersen (1933) §1.2, 'Language is nothing but a set of human habits, the purpose of which is to give expression to thoughts and feelings, and especially to impart them to others.'
(3) Sweet (1891) §16, 'Language is the expression of ideas by means of **speech-sounds** combined into **words**. Words are combined into **sentences**, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts.'

§3. To many it will seem alarmingly unscientific to struggle on without a definition of our most basic term, and as questions of definition are persistently troublesome in all linguistic studies it is worth saying a word about the use of definitions. The chief difficulty arises when we have to limit a word in current use to some more rigorously defined sense, and this is well illustrated by the term *language* itself. In *Philosophical Investigations* Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote:

'Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,—but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all "language". I will try to explain this.

'Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: "There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games'"—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!—Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to

ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. Are they all "amusing"? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball-games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.

'I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say "games form a family"' (from §§65–67).

If we are inventing a technical term as an analytical instrument, we can give it whatever meaning we like. If we want to take over a term in common use, we must reckon with this principle of family resemblances operative in the semantic spread of words in ordinary use. Of course we can still arbitrarily adopt a rigorous use if we explain what we are doing, but we do so at a price. First, there is always danger of confusion because our minds are so accustomed to the more flexible general use. Second, the next writer on our subject is liable to adopt quite a different arbitrary definition, so that readers who try to pursue the subject have to learn a new set of definitions with each book they tackle. There are, for instance, well over two hundred different definitions of the term *sentence* for language-students to cope with. But above all, we shall have fragmented a subject which we all, partly because of our linguistic habits and experience, feel hangs together. For these reasons I shall try to give definitions only of technical terms; for words in common use I shall give descriptions or working accounts designed to throw light on, rather than to depart from, ordinary usage. In the case of the word *language* I want to approach the description from three directions: considering the type of structure it is, the type of function it has, and how it can be delimited in relation to neighbouring phenomena.

Note

A survey of definitions of *sentence* up to the date of his writing is given by Fries (1952), Chapter 2.

§4. Structurally, language is an articulated system of signs, primarily realised in the medium of speech. We shall spend the next few paragraphs considering what this means. It is a **system**, not a mere

collection of parts, because in any given language the functioning parts hang together and condition each other. We can see this most clearly if we go outside our own language and compare its conventions with those of other languages. In vocabulary, for instance, the semantic spread or functional range of Modern English *sheep* is limited by the co-presence of *mutton* in the language, as contrasted with that of, say, *mouton* in French; the semantic spread of Swedish *farmor* (paternal grandmother) is limited by the presence of *mormor* (maternal grandmother) in the same vocabulary, as contrasted with that of English *grandmother*. Each unit is delimited by its neighbours, and therefore all are ultimately interdependent—like the English parochial system in which the borders are all mutually determined and no interstices are left over. The same features can be observed in the organisation of grammar: for instance, in Modern English, which has no pronoun dual, the plural is used with reference to, or in connection with, more than one, but in Old English, which had, the plural was used in connection with more than two. A comparable type of mutual conditioning can be observed in the elements of the sound system; and again in the relationships between the various component systems of a language—the question of just what is expressed by means of vocabulary and what by means of grammar in a given language, for instance (consider how you would render *Così fan tutte* into English). By taking examples outside English I have tried to bring out aspects of English structure that might otherwise be overlooked; I do not mean to suggest that all languages somehow or other cover the same ground semantically, for this is not the case. The total semantic coverage of a language depends on the total experience of the speech-community using that language, and experience differs from community to community. When we compare languages, therefore, there are always some similar and some distinctive ranges of meaning expressed.

Notes

1. The conception of language as an articulated system of signs is funda-mental in F. de Saussure (1916), and is expounded there most fully in Part I.

2. It would strictly be more correct to say that language is systematic than that it is a system, for the various systems that make up any given language are not integrated with each other to the same extent or in the same way as are the internal parts of a single system. J. R. Firth (1948), p. 151, uses the term **polysystemic** for this characteristic of language. This refinement of thinking is very proper, but to give prominence to it at the present stage may obscure the much more fundamental contrast between a system and an aggregation, which is one of the first things to grasp when looking at language-structure.

§5. The kind of system language is, is an articulated system. The word **articulated** is ultimately derived from Latin *articulus*, diminutive of

artus 'joint', and it is here used to refer to the property in languages of being able to build up units of one order into units of another order, that is, not merely something bigger, but something functioning in quite a different way from its component parts (compare the difference between single vertebrae and the backbone they compose). In English, for example, the two words *but* and *bit* are each made up of three sounds in a given order; the difference between them is made by the middle sound. Now the difference of sound between *u* and *i* does not have any significance in itself (see how differently it functions in other paired sequences like *hut, hit; fun, fin; sun, sin*), but these sounds are the means of making a distinction between two units of a different order from themselves (namely, words). You will notice that at this level the articulations are almost wholly governed by convention; we acquire whole words when we learn our mother tongue, and if we want to be understood we do not form too many new ones for ourselves. But words themselves can be articulated into units of another, more complex order, usually called sentences, and this is where an element of personal creativeness enters into our utterances. If we know a language we can always articulate from its words (if it has words) sentences we have never heard before, and we can count on their being understood by speakers to whom, likewise, they are new.

_ Along with this difference between words and sentences goes another. Though words, unlike speech-sounds, have meanings, sentences have meanings of a much more particular and complete kind. Negatively, we can say that *but* is not the same as *bit*, but positively we can only give for each a considerable range of possible meanings. Once they are put into sentences each is relatively precisely located within that range: '*Try a bit harder*', '*Please give me a bit of that*', '*There was no bit in the carpenter's shop*', '*In communication theory the unit of information is the bit*', '*He bit a piece out of the apple*'. In some cases the particularising may proceed further, as when a sentence spoken by an actor in a play is interpreted by the hearers in the light of the knowledge that it is part of a play. Some years ago a good deal of panic was caused when a news announcement about the invasion of earth from another planet was included in a broadcast play, for listeners who had just tuned in did not realise that it was a play. So the progressive articulatory structure of language can be seen as a way of making increasingly precise the meaning of the component parts. The relevance of context to the significance of individual units must never be overlooked. It may even have to serve as the sole means of distinguishing two like-sounding utterances, such as *The sun's rays meet* and *The sons raise meat* (example from C. F. Hockett, 1958, §2.1).

But context, as we have already suggested, must not be thought of as nothing more than environment in the utterance. It includes the

immediate social setting of the utterance, the function of the total relevant linguistic structure in its social setting, and even the entire cultural matrix in which the language functions. As a simple example, consider how you would explain the meaning or function of such linguistic structures as '*Good morning*' or '*Your worship*' without reference to social and cultural institutions. Such forms of expression are also a particularly clear pointer to the interpretation of talk about linguistic forms 'having meaning'. By this and similar expressions throughout the book, I do not suggest that the meanings forms have are anything like distinct objects, 'ghosts in the machine'; *meaning* in the relevant sense can be analysed as equivalent to *use* (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953, §43, 'For a *large* class of cases . . . the meaning of a word is its use in the language'). There are, I think, compelling reasons to keep the word *meaning* for the kind of uses linguistic forms have, as long as we do not let it lead us into the error of dualism.

Notes

1. The use of the term *articulated* expounded in this paragraph must not be confused with that current in phonetic studies, cf. §§24 ff.
2. The importance of context in the widest sense in the study of language is stressed in the work of Malinowski, Firth, Sapir and Pike. The dangers of 'ghost in the machine' theories are examined not only by Wittgenstein, but also by Ryle (1949), who is not concerned with meaning in language, but with other matters in which the temptation of dualism is strong.

§6. What language is a system of, is **signs.** The word *sign*, like the word *language*, has many different meanings, but the one chiefly relevant here is 'a mark or device having some special meaning or import attached to it' (*OED.*, sb. 2). Note that the mark or device is not chosen necessarily as being inherently representative, or expressive, or symbolic, of its import; the association of the one with the other is arbitrary, conventional—in the words of the *OED.* the meaning or import is attached, and it is people who do the attaching. With most linguistic forms this is obvious enough; what is not always realised is that even the relatively few and peripheral elements in language that are to some extent imitative or onomatopoeic differ from language to language and from time to time according to the conventions of usage—the Anglo-Saxons expressed sympathy by saying '*He! He!*' and as is well known, English bells go *ding-dong* and German ones *bim-bam.* Such forms are also subject to phonetic changes whereby their originally imitative character is completely obscured, as happened in the development of Latin *pipio* to French *pigeon*, itself borrowed into English to become the modern form *pigeon.* But even this limited measure of imitativeness is unusual, and characteristically linguistic forms are conventional in the sense that we use them as we do because that is

what we have learnt as the practice of the speech-community we belong to; and they are arbitrary in the sense that we can give no reason for our predecessors' use of them than that they too inherited them from yet earlier generations.

Scholars have distinguished in various ways between *signs* and *symbols*, but it is probably most convenient in linguistic work to reserve *symbol* for those things selected to stand for others by reason of some inherent aptness or appropriateness, and *sign* for those selected independently of any such considerations. Thus, though all language may be used symbolically, and some linguistic forms do have expressive or imitative value, the reasons for using a particular form in a particular function in a given language are independent of its symbolic value. Accordingly, linguistic forms can best be described as signs.

Notes

1. The case for this distinction between signs and symbols is argued by Saussure (1916), p. 101. Unfortunately, the importance of the symbolic use of linguistic forms has caused many scholars to write of them as being symbols. What is involved here is not necessarily a difference of opinion, but often only a difference of emphasis, between those who concentrate on the factors determining the forms, and those who concentrate on the way the forms are used. Students must be prepared to meet divergent terminology in this and other matters, cf. the usage of Edward Sapir, for instance in the passage quoted in §11 below.
2. What is said in this paragraph about a sign and its import must be interpreted with that caution against dualism already recommended in §5. Cf. again Wittgenstein (1958), p. 5, 'The mistake we are liable to make could be expressed thus: We are looking for the use of a sign, but we look for it as though it were an object *co-existing* with the sign .. The sign .. gets its significance from the system of signs, from the language to which it belongs.'

§7. Though we have used the term *sign* in talking about the structure of language, it is in fact a functional term—that is, there is no particular kind of thing that is or is not, can or cannot be, a sign. Anything is capable of being one; it is a question of how it is used, that is, of whether a meaning or import is attached to it. In this sense, regardless of the form chosen as their exponent, signs are necessarily mental products. They are also necessarily two-sided—there must always be, on one hand, the thing that is a sign of something, and on the other, the thing it is a sign of. The exponent may well be something existing in its own right, but it does not function as, that is, become, a sign until it signifies something. There are, then, three things we may think of, the exponent, its import, and their union, the sign. The French language copes with this situation more neatly and lucidly than English, having the words *signifiant* for 'that which signifies', *signifié* for 'that which is

signified', and *signe* for what results from *signifiant* and *signifié* in mutual dependence on one another, namely, the sign. We shall keep to the English terms **exponent**, **signification** and **sign**, but our special use of them may be easier to remember if you bear in mind the French forms. The mutual dependence of exponent and signification must always be remembered; though we distinguish them in analytical work so as to be able to focus attention on each separately, they have in reality no separate existence, since each is only an aspect of the sign.

§8. There are two further things to notice about signs. First, since they are mental products, the distinctions between them reflect, not external reality (whatever that may be), but the mind's way of classifying its experience. The distinctions between signs, like the association of exponent and signification, are to some extent arbitrary within the speech-community. This again may best be seen by looking outside the familiar distinctions of our own language. Whorf (1956), pp. 208–216, gives many vivid examples, of which we may quote two. Where English has one word, *snow*, Eskimo has distinct words for falling snow, slushy lying snow and hard-packed snow, but no generic word for snow; we think of snow as a distinct kind of thing, for which, if we have experienced it, we naturally have a word, but we do not generally realise that this is not a view emanating from our experience of the world so much as from our experience of the English language. The second goes deeper. Where English has the sentence '*I clean it (gun) with the ramrod*', Shawnee has '*Nipēkwālakha*', in which *Ni-* corresponds to 'I' and *-a* to 'it', but the remaining components are *pēkw* ('dry space'), *ālak* ('interior of hole'), *h* ('by motion of tool, instrument'). Accordingly (and this is the second point), what a sign signifies is its signification (cf. §7); it does not signify an object, or, if it is a linguistic sign, anything in the external, non-linguistic world. Words are certainly not just names of things, though some of them (e.g. proper names) are used to refer to things. A sign-system is a mental system for whose validity questions about the external world are immaterial.

§9. The characteristics we have so far unravelled from the complex called language do not constitute a sufficiently exhaustive account. For example, all the features we have identified so far can be found in a traffic-light system. The units in the standard English type of traffic-light installation are mutually delimiting, (partly) arbitrarily selected, and capable of rudimentary articulation (the combination red and yellow having a signification not deducible from that of its parts). Yet it would be a departure from ordinary usage to speak of traffic-lights as forming a language, and it is ordinary usage we are now examining. What does such a system lack that it is not ordinarily called language?