

The Philosophical Roots of Traditional English Grammar

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There is a significant cluster of documents written mostly during the Eighteenth Century in Scotland which inquire into the subject of “universal grammar.” With chapter titles like “Of the Origin and Progress of Language,” these documents often posit a fictional “primitive man” who has all of the faculties of reason but no taught language. On this basis, they construct narratives that detail the possible evolution of language.

However, these narratives are probably more useful, and probably intended, as a philosophical investigation into language, rather than as genuine history. The philosophical view of language that emerges in these narratives is specifically a view that is based on the parts of speech. The evolution of language is the evolution of the part of speech categories, and furthermore, the parts of speech constitute a complete explanation of linguistic epistemology.

The basis of Adam Smith’s version of the narrative, for example, is the evolution from the concrete through higher degrees of abstraction. Hence he argues that the noun substantive is the “first” part of speech. He specifically points to the most concrete among this concrete category, i.e., the proper name. The proper name would later be abstracted to form category names. A necessity then emerges for verbs and adjectives. They both function as attributes that serve to define a particular individual within the category. At the far end of the evolutionary scale he introduces the preposition category, and then as the apex, the height of abstraction, the word “of”:

A preposition denotes a relation, and nothing but a relation. But before men could institute a word, which signified a relation, and nothing but a relation, they must have been able, in some measure, to consider this relation abstractedly from the related objects The invention of such a word, therefore, must have required a considerable degree of abstraction. . . .

The preposition “above”, for example, denotes the relation of superiority, not in abstract, as it is expressed by the word “superiority”, but in [a concrete instance].

Ask any man of common acuteness, What relation is expressed by the preposition “above”? He will readily answer, that of “superiority”. By the preposition “below”? He will as quickly reply, that of “inferiority.” But ask him, what relation is expressed by the preposition “of,” and, if he has not beforehand employed his thoughts a good deal upon these subjects, you may safely allow him a week to consider his answer. . . . The preposition “of”, denotes relation in general It marks that the noun substantive which goes before it, is somehow or other related to that which comes after it, but without in any respect ascertaining how We often apply it, therefore, to express the most opposite relations; because, the most opposite relations agree in so far that each of them comprehends in it the general idea or nature of a relation. We say, “the father of the son”, and “the son of the father;” “the fir-trees of the forest”, and the “forest of the fir-trees.” . . . The word “of” . . . serves very well to denote all those relations, because in itself it denotes no particular relation, but only relation in general; and so far as any particular relation is collected from such expressions, it

is inferred by the mind, not from the preposition itself, but from the nature and arrangement of the substantives, between which the preposition is placed. (Smith, 212-213)

The universal grammar debates provide a remarkable range of opinions on the arrangement and primacy of the parts of speech. As well, they show the folly in dismissing the parts of speech as an elementary (in the bad sense) word classification or a “mere taxonomy.” The Universal Grammarians are attempting to prove that part of speech categories are rationally valid, i.e., that they mirror the functions of the mind, or, as they occasionally concede, at least the functions of language itself. Such a claim will have implications for pedagogy: if this categorical system is in fact somehow inherent to the mind, teaching will be both easiest and most effective if it is somehow founded upon this categorical system. I have found first year college students remarkably adept at analyzing the part of speech components of sentence structure, that is, the part of speech designation of phrases and clauses, as well as their interconnections (also a part of speech issue). I can see why these grammarians believed that these categories were somehow just waiting there to be trained and exploited in the classroom.

It is important to note that universal grammar is different from the Eighteenth Century school known as universal language. In his *Essay Towards a Real Character and Philosophical Language*, Bishop Wilkins is seeking to create an artificial language that corresponds to reality. He attempts to define a new parts of speech, based on Aristotle’s ten predicates. (Aristotle’s ten predicates are substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, posture, condition, action and affection. They are explained in his book called *Categories*.) Bishop Wilkins claims to be creating a language that precisely reflects the elements of reality. This of course has unfortunate consequences in that it opens the door to the classic accusation of anthropomorphism, or seeing reality in human terms:

The foundation of such classification, much in vogue with the language-planners, is in fact Aristotle’s ten predicaments, eked out with categories from Scholastic philosophy. This gives rise to a circularity in which scholars, claiming to catalogue the real world as a preliminary to its symbolization, take as their starting-point such Aristotelian categories as substance and accident, and then seek properties in the phenomena to correspond to them. . . . this procedure is not peculiar to the inventors of artificial languages, but is common to all the new supposedly empirical sciences, being particularly prevalent in botanical classification. (Padley, 362-363)

However, the quotation provided below proves that the universal grammar school was never interested in the linguistic mirroring of reality. Instead, it is interested solely in the proclivities of the mind, at best, or of language, at least. Universal grammar cannot be convicted of seeing reality in human terms, because it does not refer to the external world. It examines the pattern of rational categories, and it inquires into the connection between these categories and the mind or language. This quotation, from an article out of the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, clearly illustrates that universal grammar does not seek to connect the theory of language with the theory of nature:

In the natural world, no attribute can possibly exist without a substance to which it belongs, nor any substance without possessing attributes. But the mind admits not of such limitations; but can with the utmost facility separate every quality from every object and consider them apart; as colour without surfaces, surfaces without solidity, or weight without matter. In this manner, the mind abstracts those attributes which denote motion or energy from their movers or energizers, in the same way that it abstracts qualities from their substances. And it is these motions thus abstracted which form that species of words called verbs; in the same manner as those attributes which denote quantities and qualities abstracted from their necessary substances, form adjectives.

Here then we discover a most essential difference between the order of nature, and that represen-

tation of it which man makes by means of words. For in nature, every quality must at all times be united with some substance, nor can ever be exhibited separate from it; but in language, every attributive, if it be considered at all, must be separated from the object to which it naturally belongs. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Of Universal Grammar," 1771)

These quotations, clearly, insist on a fundamental difference between the order of nature and the order of mind or language. Thus universal grammar may actually have more association with deconstruction, as in the inherent slippage between linguistic meaning and the reality that it represents, than it does with anthropomorphism.

Still, the root principle behind universal grammar remains the Aristotelian concept of *substance* versus *attribute*. "Substance" is the term for a thing taken separately from all of its qualities. The word "substance" in philosophy refers to an entity "having an independent existence or status" (OED). "Attribution" is the act of predication. Attributes are features of substances and hence they are things which *do not* have an independent existence, but which inhere in something else.

Of course, these are purely metaphysical concepts; the "pure substance" does not exist, except in the landscape of rational language. In nature there is no unattributed substance; grammatically, for the purpose of making a sentence, we *take* something as a substance, the "subject" of the clause, the independent thing about which we make a predication. Every "noun substantive," (for example, "man") is an example of a substance without any attributes. "Nouns adjective," refers to a word that is originally an adjective (the name of an attribute, such as "big," "blue," or "modern"), but becomes used as a noun (the name of a substance, such as "bigness," "blueness," or "modernity"). There are numerous such categories, including, for example, the term by which they refer to the infinitive verb: the "participle substantive." Since the infinitive form of the verb acts merely as the *name* of an action, eg. to fly, and not the action *actually taking place*, it is considered essentially a noun. The infinitive is referred to as "the noun of the verb." Again, "infinitive" means "not related to time;" hence, it is a verb with no information as to tense, past, present or future. When it is asserted as actually occurring, the verb is placed within an actual time, and hence is no longer "infinitive" but becomes a "finite" verb, i.e., one concerned with time. There is a subtle but real distinction, made by universal grammarians, between different types of substantive, those that begin as nouns, and those that derive from adjectives and adverbs but are used as nouns.

Attribution carries one specific sub-category. This is seen in every adverb, which is referred to as the "attribute of an attribute." The adverb modifies either an adjective, a verb, or another adverb; hence, it is the part of speech that modifies words which are already classified as attributes. Furthermore, attributes do not come only in the form of single words; phrases and clauses also act as modifiers. The attribution of a core noun is seen as the entire purpose and structure of the sentence, whether these attributes are words, phrases, or clauses acting as adjectives or adverbs.

Other than substance and the various attributes, only the two connective categories remain, the conjunction and the preposition. This view narrows the parts of speech to six basic functions, noun, verb, adjective, adverb, conjunction, and preposition. It is helpful to students if we emphasize this clear set of larger categories, and avoid the bewildering jargon of parts of speech that are merely sub-categories of these six, the articles, determiners, participles, gerunds, and so on. Indeed, this set of six functions does seem to be comprehensive. For example, the adjective function really does include the possessive pronoun, the possessive case of the noun, the article, and the adjective proper. Even forms such as the infinitive and the participle can be absorbed into the more fundamental categories. The infinitive is, as stated above, actually the noun form of the verb. And the participle is something that functions either as an adjective or as a noun form of a verb. The narrow sub-categories of word classification tend very strongly to reduce back into the six main ones: noun, verb, adjective, adverb, conjunction and preposition.

One attack on the validity of this schema comes with the observation of functional shift. Some have used the observation that a given word, phrase or clause may shift to different Part of Speech functions as a basis for casting doubt on the stability of language and hence of meaning. Of course, it does not take such persons long to use this as a justification for casting doubt on everything. It is true that with frightening ease a given word can be a noun, a verb, and then an adjective; even whole phrases and clauses may take on and change these functions. Tell students that the word "mountain" is an adjective, or that "try" is a noun, and you will stun them momentarily. Infinite similar demonstrations are available. The same prepositional phrase may function as an adjective or as an adverb; a clause may be a sentence one minute, and a noun the next.

Functional shift makes it look like there is no system to English at all; that is, until we notice that some things never change: no matter how slippery the individual words, phrases, or clauses, the SET OF FUNCTIONS that they perform never changes. There is a little mnemonic that students may find handy: "OTFAS: Only The Functions Are Stable." These functions, the parts of speech, remain a comprehensive explanation of the system of English. What fulfills each function may change, but the functions are clearly limited to the six parts of speech. To the universal grammarians, these parts are unchanging and complete.

The basic categories are comprehensive and durable. But they operate not merely on the word level. They also explain the higher levels of syntax. The parts of speech explain essentially all of the higher level sentence structure possibilities. Every phrase and every dependent clause functions either as an adjective, and adverb, or a noun. In fact, it soon pays to stop calling it a noun clause, and just admit that it is a noun. Emphasizing this functional unity will help students to become aware of the structural solidity that goes on at these higher levels; these higher level word clusters are units in the strict sense of the word.

The parts of speech are the elementary functions of the human mind, or at least of human language, and are not merely a set of name tags to be dispensed with and slightly embarrassed of. What makes universal grammar an explanatory system, and not in fact a "loose taxonomy," is the hierarchy identified among the parts of speech. The categories are not merely a list, but a set of levels. One important universal grammar observation is the decision to categorize the verb and the adjective as versions of one major function. Both the adjective and the verb can be seen as essentially noun modifiers:

In examining the different attributes of substances, we readily perceive that some of them have their essence in motion; such are, "to walk," "to fly," "to strike," "to live," &c. Others have it in the privation of motion; as, "to stop," "to rest," "to cease," "to die," &c. And others have it in subjects that have nothing to do with either motion or its privation; such are the attributes of "great" and "little," "wise" and "foolish," "white" and "black," and, in a word, the several "quantities" and "qualities" of all things. This therefore furnishes a natural division of attributives of this order; and grammarians have called all those, whose essence consists in motion or its privation, VERBS; and all the others have been called ADJECTIVES; each of which we shall consider separately.

Verbs are all those principal words which denote "attributes," whose essence consists in motion, or energies, (for we chuse to make use of this last term, as it implies the exertions of the mind as well as those of the body), or their privation. This order of attributives differs from the other called "adjectives;" not only in the particular above-mentioned, but also because adjectives denote only qualities or quantities, which do not admit of any change of state; whereas the verbal attributives may be considered as in several different states, and therefore admit of several variations in the term employed to express these. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1771:734)

While they both essentially modify the noun, the adjective and the verb are clearly separate categories because of the extra elements that apply only to the verb, i.e., its use of tense, aspect, and mood, and especially its ability to perform the act of assertion itself. There is an interesting gradual scale in the following observation:

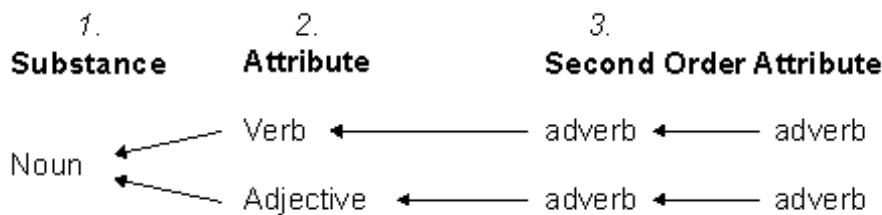
The Adjective denotes a simple quality, as brave, cruel, good swift, round, square. The Participle denotes a quality, together with a certain modification of time; as . . . loving, which relates to time present . . . [and] loved, which alludes to time past . . . The Verb is still more complex than the participle. It not only expresses an attribute, and refers that attribute to time . . . but it also comprehends an assertion; so that it may form, when joined to a noun, a complete sentence, or proposition. (Beattie, 348)

Reasoning that the verb and the adjective belong together as attributes, universal grammarians long ago refuted the still persistent framework which places the noun and verb as equally fundamental. This framework cannot then explain why we have an adverb but not an “adnoun.” It produces a clearly inefficient diagram. There is something wrong with the role given to adverbs in this system:

NOUN <---- adjective <-- adverb <-- adverb

VERB <---- adverb <-- adverb

On the other hand, the Universal Grammar schema provides a strong and clear place for the adverb. Being the modifier both of the verb and adjective, the adverb is a modifier of a modifier, or what they refer to as a second order attribute:



The universal grammarians have demonstrated a durable, comprehensive set of rational functions. In addition, it has been noted that these functions apply not only on the level of the single word but also comprise the role of every the phrase and dependent clause. Finally, let us note that the only remaining aspect of the sentence, i.e., the independent clause itself, is in fact a product of the these parts in combination. We can I think convincingly conclude that all of sentence structure is comprised within the above chart of the parts of speech. And if this chart explains all of sentence structure, does it not also both demystify and deepen grammar as a subject of study, and in fact restore its status as a theory of rational thought and language.

However, I would argue that the classroom value of this material should not be in the direct teaching of parts of speech theory. Instead, if we are certain that this structure is at the root of language, this may give us an insight into what students will respond to because it is in their linguistic nature.

This subject, I would propose, is sentence structure. If we teach sentence diagramming, we will be drawing upon and sharpening this innate analytical capacity. This is particularly true for sentence diagramming that requires the student to indicate the Part of Speech function of each unit. We can dispense with

the word level right away, and deliberately inculcate the larger phrase and clause units and connections. Composing the individual sentence is a skill equivalent to fundamental reasoning; it is an innate logical faculty that we are allowing to fester untrained when we do not teach traditional grammar. The vital point is conceiving of the higher word groupings as single, closed entities that interconnect. This is structural awareness in itself, which is perhaps the basis for education itself.

Modern attacks on linguistic truth focus on the arbitrary nature of the sign, but they ignore the objective nature of the underlying categories. Hence, Karl Uitti tells us that “for the medieval schoolmen, logic was the ‘a priori’ formulation that acted as ‘langue,’ the system behind the process of utterance” (56). Like the scholastics that they essentially were, the universal grammarians use reason alone to derive an ‘a priori’ set of fundamental functions. But the Eighteenth Century also saw the end of scholastic reasoning, with the advent of empiricism. We are now in the thick of the experimental epoch. The opponents of grammar use the experimental method, rather than the method of pure reason. They assail us with oddly construed experimental studies to show that teaching grammar doesn’t work. However, we know that it must work. Being pre-enlightenment in the good sense, we can argue for the ‘a priori’ role of the part of speech functions. In turn we can argue, without construing some classroom experiment (though we could do that too if we cared little enough to sacrifice a group of students), that sentence structure analysis has fundamental educational value.

In order to become aware of sentence structure, students must see that the functions remain stable from the word, to the phrase, to the clause level. It is worthwhile to begin ignoring and subsuming the word level as early as possible, to enhance the view of the larger structures. Students must see that the entire phrase or clause group, working as a unit, moves position intact and performs its function as a whole entity. We may define the phrase and the dependent clause as “a group of words unified by performing a single part of speech function.” With the number of functions so limited, we can identify exactly four graphic indicators that are capable of a diagram analysis for any sentence in English. They include capitalizing the independent clause, square bracketing the adjective, and round bracketing the adverb. These diagrams will reflect the parts of speech logic behind the larger elements of sentence structure:

Parsing Analysis Examples.

Lincoln:

THE YEAR <-[that is drawing <-(toward its close)] HAS BEEN FILLED <-(with the blessings <-[of fruitful fields and healthful skies.])

Students:

THE EVENING <-[that is drawing <-(toward its close)] HAS BEEN FILLED <-(with the aura <-[of elegant music and graceful conversation.])

THE SOCIAL CIRCLE <-[which had been created <-(through much labour)] WAS INHABITED <-(with the delights <-[of witty and loving companionship.])

THE VALUES <-[that Jane Austen expresses <-(in this novel)] ARE DESCRIBED <-(through the actions <-[of the characters and events.])

THE WOMAN <-[who is pleasing <-(in manner)] IS CONSIDERED ACCOMPLISHED <-(by most people <-[in culture and society.])

UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR

(The Eighteenth Century in particular)

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Note: One observation on functional shift illustrates two important phrase types, the "key word" phrase versus the "whole function" phrase. In a key word phrase, the unit is produced because all of the words modify a central word; for example, a noun along with its modifiers gives a noun phrase. But whole function phrases are the ones that do not contain a word of the given Parts of Speech type. For example, the phrase "through the door" may act as an adverb, even though it contains no adverbs in itself. With the whole function phrase, it is the fact of performing one Part of Speech function that creates its unity. The verb phrase expresses its peculiar importance when viewed in these terms. Note that the verb phrase is always a key word phrase; it cannot be created by a collection of words that is not centered upon the main verb. Noun, adjective, and adverb phrases can all be created in this way, but not the special quality of the verb, the energizing act of assertion.

Note: In *Linguistics and Literary Theory* (1969), Karl Uitti reveals linkages between modern linguistics and its early precursors: "for the medieval schoolmen, logic was the a priori formulation that acted as langue, the system behind the process of utterance" (56). Uitti shows a single evolution of thought from Aristotelian to Transformational grammar. Interestingly, Saussure does not make a point of connecting his theories to scholastic grammar. Likewise, in his lengthy book, *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*, Noam Chomsky mentions, but does not explain the a medieval pedigree behind his theory of "deep structure."