

Think linguist!

Seminar week 2: Understanding the Theory of Syntax, Summer 2014

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A famous hypercorrection

This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put.
— the late British prime minister Winston Churchill (apocryphal)

**Churchill was apparently corrected
by an editor (in one version).**

What was Churchill (apocryphally) upset about?

It's allegedly a rule in English that you shouldn't end a sentence with a preposition:

- “What are you afraid of?” – “Of what are you afraid?”
- “Get a move on.” – “Get a move on . . . it.”
- “That is something I will not put up with.” – “That is something up with which I will not put!”

So why would people have thought that?

- LATIN DOES NOT ALLOW IT. And Latin is the ur-language.
- English has got to be like Latin, because how else would the English have SUPERIOR CIVILIZATION? (Since I'm posting this on the web, this is your official reminder that I use a lot of *irony*.)

But was there a nugget of . . . some kind of “insight” in the thought?

Very few languages really allow dangling prepositions!



Will not chase your
DANGLING MODIFIER

Except. . .

- The Germanic languages are totally addicted to their particle verbs.
 - “ausnehmen”
 - “to move on”
 - “to put up with”
 - etc.

But English does something even odder!

What city did you go to school **in**?

But you can't say in German:

- *Welcher Stadt bist du zur Schule **in** gegangen?
- **Welcher Stadt bist du zur Schule gegangen **in**?

So people have this intuition that...

... that there is something funny about English.

- And they seem to have expressed this by believing in awkward style rules.
- Another one: no split infinitives!

To boldly split infinitives where no infinitives have been split before!



So this is lesson #1.

Segue into Sag and Wasow:

People have *intuitions* about language.

Things that are therefore not necessarily the case:

- What you see in the world (remember E-language?) is what language is.
- What people say about (*prescribe* to be) language is not necessarily their I-language. This by now should not be a surprise.

We need a “methodology” to get at I-language.

The oft-maligned grammaticality judgement

Instead of

- videotaping the universe, forever (E-language)
- asking people to explain what may not necessarily reflect their real behaviour (in a sense, prescription)

we investigate *conditions* by constructing examples.

**And what do we do with the
examples?**

“Grammaticality” judgements!

Yep, we put little asterisks next to things.

The stars are not a *normative* claim!

- All a little star says is that a particular speaker didn't think that a sentence was part of his/her grammar.
- Gradients?
 - Sure, why not? Let's exhaust the entire Wingdings font if we want to!
 - Or just a Likert scale. (e.g. "on a scale of 1-7...")

But how much would gradients help? (Possible topic for presentation, by the way!)

But asterisks are not enough!

What do we *do* with grammaticality (acceptability) judgements?

- We look for contrasts.
- We ask: “Why is *this* acceptable, but not *that*?”

(Some) possible kinds of “starting” hypotheses for a *:

- It's uninterpretable. (Semantically ill-formed.)
- It's interpretable, but odd in meaning. (Semantically well-formed, but pragmatically ill-formed.)
- It's interpretable, but actually just syntactically ill-formed.

How do you go beyond description?

To explain, “why this and not that”?

- Line between description and explanation not obvious.
 - An explanation should allow you to predict other things.
 - Other things: judgements with a language, judgements across languages.
 - (Characteristics of other areas of cognition? Species?)
- Different “levels” of explanation, but *learnability* is a key one.
 - “Poverty of the stimulus”.

**With that, let's look at Sag and
Wasow's "Problem 1"**

A little elementary, but I think worth it.

Some of their sentences:

- Kim and Sandy is looking for a new bicycle.
- The boat floated down the river sank.
- Terry really likes they.
- They persuaded me to defend themselves.
- Which chemical did you mix the hydrogen peroxide and?

(I have heard dangling conjunctions before. . .)

Sag and Wasow's bigger example: reflexives

- *We like us.
- We like ourselves.
- She likes her. where she \neq her
- *Nobody likes ourselves.
- *Ourselves like ourselves.
- ...

This leads to their first hypothesis.

Hypothesis #1:

A reflexive pronoun can appear in a sentence only if that sentence also contains a preceding expression that has the same reference; a non reflexive pronoun cannot appear in a sentence that contains such an expression.

Let's test it out.

- She voted for her. – if “she” and “her” are different, then non reflexive is OK.
- She voted for herself. – must be the same reference
- *We voted for herself. – definitely not the same reference.
- *We gave presents to us. – the same reference, therefore need reflexive.
- *Nobody told ourselves about ourselves. – would be OK if the first “ourselves” were “us”.

So it **seems** like it works.

But behold!

- We think that nobody likes us. – “us” is allowed but “we” = “us”!
- *We think that nobody likes ourselves. – exactly the reverse of Hyp. 1.

These are too easy to construct, but maybe it's the presence of “that”?

Sag and Wasow have a response for that.

Consider:

- We think that she voted for her. (where “she” \neq “her”)
- We think that she voted for herself.
- *We think that herself voted for her.
- *We think that herself voted for herself.

Try to fit these exactly to the definition of Hyp. 1.

So S&W make a deduction.

Deductive reasoning is king here. Hypothesis #2:

*A reflexive pronoun can appear in a **clause** only if that **clause** also contains a preceding expression that has the same reference; a non reflexive pronoun cannot appear in a **clause** that contains such an expression.*

So we invent/introduce the notion of “clause-ness” to explain the mysterious power of “that”.

But wait! It still doesn't work!

Let's do these together:

- Our friends like us.
- *Our friends like ourselves.
- Those pictures of us offended us.
- *Those pictures of us offended ourselves.
- We found a letter to us in the trash.
- *We found a letter to ourselves in the trash. (?)

S&W make another revision.

Hypothesis #3:

*A reflexive pronoun must be an argument of a verb that has another preceding **argument** with the same reference. A nonreflexive pronoun cannot appear as an **argument of a verb** that has a preceding coreferential **argument**.*

This starts to take on a certain structure.

X ← VERB → Y-reflexive if Y = X.
X ← VERB → Y-nonreflexive if Y ≠ X.

Hurrah! I've given us our first bit of "formalism". (And these are actually a crude approximation of Principles A and B of the Binding Theory. . . another possible presentation topic!)

Of course, this implies some interesting things.

What is “important” in a syntactic judgement?

- We’ve committed that “verbness” is important.
- We’ve committed that “argumentness” is important.
- We’ve committed that coreference (a semantic feature) is important.

Obviously not an exhaustive list.

Then Sag and Wasow leave us to our own devices.

The problem of reciprocals: “each other”, “one another”.

- They like each other.
- *Each other like(s) them.

How close do reciprocals behave like reflexives? S&W challenge us to test it out.

**One more challenge: can we
construct these for German (or
some other language)? Let's try it
right now!**

**We likes ussssss. (Something
Gollum might say)**



Then Sag and Wasow lead us through some background

I will let you absorb the historical details, but some things to consider and discuss:

- The rejection of behaviourism: was it wise?
- How “Whorfian” is language? (My SF novel quote from two weeks ago.)
- How suited *is* language anyway to communication?

So let's talk about the elephant in the room



Yep, presentation topics

Why don't I just put up a list?

- I needed to get an idea of the “level” of the group as a whole.
- For theory “beginners”, need to match topics carefully.

but I'm starting to get an idea of the level of the group and what might be appropriate.

- Can choose linguistic phenomena, or...
- ... high-level methodological-type presentations are also OK, if done in depth.

So here's how we'll do it.

- Arrange an appointment with me by email over the next couple of weeks.
- I'll give you some suggestions in person.
- Take a week after that to think about it and decide.
- Then we'll set a schedule.

**Next week: a little more
philosomethodology. Then the week
after, dunking directly in Hi Theory.**