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:

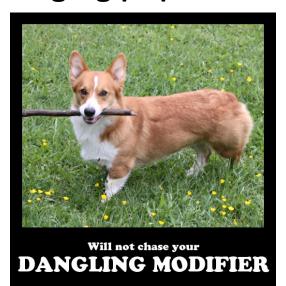
- "What are you afraid of?" "Of what are you afraid?"
- "Get a move on." "Get a move on ...it."
- "That is something I will not put up with." "That is something up with which I will not put!"

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!



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.

$$X \leftarrow VERB \rightarrow Y$$
-reflexive if $Y = X$. $X \leftarrow VERB \rightarrow Y$ -nonreflexive if $Y \neq X$.

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)

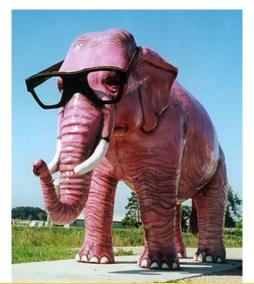


Then Sag and Wasow lead us through some background

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.