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THE GRAMMATICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RHETORIC

Discourse Analysis

by

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VI

INTRODUCTION: DIALOG AND DISCOURSE

The distinction between dialog and discourse — or dialog and monolog — is, on the surface, one of the most obvious that can be made in the study of language. And, hardly less obvious, is the equating of dialog with speaking and discourse with writing. To be sure, some speaking is monolog rather than dialog (for example, an oration), and some writing is in dialog form (for example, a Platonic dialog). But on the whole, speaking occurs naturally as dialog, and writing occurs naturally as discourse.

Another traditionally obvious distinction has been between grammar and rhetoric. Grammar is the analysis of the elements of language, the study that seeks to break down language into its ultimate units. Its data is not extended discourse, indeed, usually not even extended sentences, but the combinations of elements that are found within sentences. Rhetoric, on the other hand, has been the study of extended discourse, and not so much the breaking down of extended discourse as the building up. But like grammar, rhetoric has tended to take for granted the sentence, although it has looked for its data in more extended, complex discourse rather than within sentences.

Attempts to correlate grammar and rhetoric can be found scattered through the history of linguistic pedagogy right up to the present. Despite their superficial variety, such attempts have proceeded on only two alternatives. The first alternative is to derive a grammar of inter-sentence relations directly from one's grammar of intra-sentence constituents, to reduce rhetoric to grammar. "The second alternative involves," to quote Nils Erik Enkvist's recent programmatic statement,

building a special discourse grammar which explicitly describes or generates units beyond the sentence — say, paragraphs consisting of many sentences. The latter solution is, of course, enormously ambitious. It at once begs the question whether generating units larger than one sentence is the business of grammar proper or of some other area of linguistics such, as semantics or a new linguistic logic or rhetoric. The latter might be free to use types of rules different from those of grammar ... [1]

Neither alternative has come close to success, but certainly there is already a separate area of "discourse grammar": rhetoric. Rhetoric has always attempted to be generative, to discern patterns from which extended discourse could be

created. Thus rhetoric has always been concerned with "units beyond the sentence". The ambitiousness of the enterprise derives not, however, from the question of what discipline would have its jurisdiction but from the more basic one of what exactly would be generated.

Perhaps a clearer notion of what is to be generated would indicate that the difference between the two alternatives has been overdrawn. The need is not a *choice* between the two but a *rapprochement* between them. Indeed, the desire for rapprochement is strong, especially among those who carry the burden of teaching linguistic proficiency. But the promise of generativeness being the common factor of grammar and rhetoric has not yet been fulfilled, because the indispensable notion of the sentence is still as undefined as it was when the first textbook of Greek grammar was completed.

The thesis of the present work is that there is indeed a common factor in speaking and writing, and in breaking down language and in building it up — a factor that can bring about a rapprochement between grammar and rhetoric and facilitate the teaching and acquiring of linguistic proficiency. This key factor is the notion of dialog, and what it unlocks is the problem of the sentence. Instead of side-stepping the defining of the sentence, we go at once to the heart of the matter. Whatever the various kinds of discourse and whatever the variety of audiences, the sentence is fundamental. Once the sentence is understood — understood in terms of assertions linked together in an implied dialog — then further refinements can follow as a matter of course.

If it can be said that the primary goal of modern linguistic study has been to discover or establish the *smallest* linguistic unit, then it can be said that the primary goal of this study is the *largest* such unit. There is, of course, no limit on the size and complexity of linguistic constructs, but what we need to know is the largest *unit* that is a basic constituent of all such constructs — large or small, oral or written. This largest unit is the question and answer pair of dialog.

The questions in an implied dialog are not, however, 'transformations' of the sentences, nor do they in any way modify the nature of the sentences that provide the answers. Sentences as they actually appear rather than as they are assumed to be in the realm of 'deep structure' must be the primary concern of linguistic analysis. A grammar that is forced to resort to wholesale 'transformations' admits its inability to analyze the data *qua* data. There is nothing new in the grammarian's temptation to rewrite his data to make it easier to explain, and there will never be a complete grammar that can avoid one degree or another of transforming in order to account for some kinds of forms. But the goal of discerning the grammar of a natural language can not be achieved by transforming this nature into something else. In this respect, at least, the model of a logical calculus is more hindrance than help to the grammarian.

Yet, while the true *grammatical goal* is to avoid as much as possible the need to resort to transformations, the true *rhetorical goal* is actual (and not merely metaphorical mathematical) generativeness. A rhetoric that really functions as the principles of composition must provide nothing less than a usable means of actually *creating* new assertions to follow reasonably upon previous assertions. For rhetoric, such a designation is more true than meta-phorical. But the model of biological generation, of like springing from like, is neither true nor appropriately metaphorical for grammar. Grammar can be generative in only a very limited sense because the units that go to make up assertions are not themselves assertions. But rhetoric, with the common unit of the assertion, can hope to develop principles for creating and joining assertions to form extended discourse because succeeding assertions in a very important sense grow out of previous assertions. Assertions and sentences cannot be adequately explained as the linking of individual words or morphemes; the principles of grammar are much more complex. However, extended discourse can be adequately (if not completely) explained as the linking of individual assertions.

To what extent the present study is properly within the field of linguistics is difficult to say. If, as Göran Hammarström emphasizes, "units and relations between units are the basic linguistic facts to be described",[2] then discourse analysis is squarely in linguistics as long as it is able to focus consistently on objectively delimitable units. Of course linguists can then differ among them-selves as to what constitute the most important units and what are the kinds of relationships possible between them. But they cannot legitimately lay down in advance what kind of units or relationships these must be in order to qualify as linguistic. What is linguistically new in the present study is the consistent use of assertions as the basic units and a thoroughgoing examina-tion of the kinds of inter-assertional relations. This is a larger unit than here-tofore employed for any consistent linguistic analysis, but its use allows us to see various relations heretofore ignored in other kinds of linguistic studies. Obviously, an assertional – or discourse – grammar cannot pass for a complete linguistic theory, because there are various sub-assertional units and relations that cannot be accounted for in assertional terms. But just as obvious is the fact that no past or present candidates for a complete linguistic theory are able to account for the inter-assertional features of language.

One of the rare attempts to extend linguistic analysis to discourse is William Labov's claim to have discovered "Some Invariant Rules of Discourse Analysis".[3] However, his failure to formulate any precise conception of a basic unit of discourse (such as the assertion) and his dedication to trans-formational, rule-oriented theory render his brief attempt not only a failure

but also well-nigh incomprehensible. This failure is accounted for in two ways:
Labov eschews transformational orthodoxy when he should take advantage of
it, and he adheres to transformational orthodoxy when it would be to his
advantage to deviate from it.

The advantage of transformational grammar that Labov does not make use
of in his discourse analysis but that the present study relies on completely is
"well-formed" data. The place to begin, at least, is not with irregular,
fragmentary, inconsistent speech collected on the street corner but with
language in its most regularized, complete, consistent form — that is, with the
written prose of skillful writers when they have something precise to
communicate. Not until discourse analysis has proven itself capable of handling
such data can it aspire to the infinitely more difficult task of handling
spontaneous speech. The disadvantage of transformational grammar that Labov
does make use of is the concept of "rule". As is often the case, Labov is ad-
mirably lucid in stating the problem: "The fundamental problem of discourse
analysis is to show how one utterance follows another in a rational, rule-
governed manner — in other words, how we understand coherent discourse"
(p. 252). Unfortunately, the seed of incomprehensible jargon and distorted
interpretations is already present in this lucid summary. "Rule-governed"
could mean simply that a number of patterns or types of relationships can be
abstracted from coherent discourse and are useful in explicating and criticizing
what is said. But, as Labov uses it, this is a technical transformational-generative
term for invariant, quasi-mathematical relationships that can be reduced to
formulas. If this is what linguistic analysis must be, then there is no difficulty
in understanding why most linguists assiduously avoid discourse analysis. It
would multiply beyond even their comprehension the complexities of the
already complex 'rules' that transformational grammar has deduced for the
smallest segments of language.

The dilemma of all language study is where and for what reasons to draw
the line against seemingly insignificant variation. A Bloomfieldian empiricist
tolerates a great deal of (but by no means all) such variation. A Chomskyan
rationalist tolerates very little of it (but some, nonetheless). Labov attempts
to combine the two — to find in the actual details of largely unretouched data
the neat rules of a self-contained system. Yet different as these three kinds
of linguist may appear, they have a common goal — to gain knowledge.

The primary goal of a pedagogical grammar, however, is not knowledge
but skill. A pedagogical grammar is not a 'scientific' grammar watered-down
for classroom use; rather it is a grammar that reflects a fundamentally
pedagogical conception of language study. It does not pretend that linguistic
communication — conscious and deliberate and subject to frequent criticism
as it is — can be treated as raw data. If there is anything in this world that is

unequivocally normative, it is language. The study of language cannot legitim-
ately ignore the fact that its data is always — for better or worse — the product
of conscious and deliberate prescription. Skill in the use of language is a major
goal of every society. Skill is of course impossible without a certain amount
of knowledge, and skill is a notion that different individuals and different
communities can disagree about. But just as a lawyer who cannot win cases
cannot claim to really understand his subject, so a grammarian who cannot
increase the linguistic proficiency of students cannot claim to really under-
stand his subject. Because a certain amount of abstract knowledge is quite
possible in the absence of skill, the test of any theory of linguistic analysis
must include pedagogical success. Language is nothing if not use: if theoretical
distinctions are not easily correlated with the agreed-upon interpretations of
actual communication, then there is no proof of their *linguistic* validity.

However, those who think of linguistic pedagogy primarily in terms of
introducing the rudiments of a second language and in terms of comparative
phonological analysis find much less difficulty with the model of the human
brain as a computer than do those who think of linguistic pedagogy primarily
in terms of refining the advanced skills of precise articulation. Yet it makes
no sense to think that the second is any the less linguistic than the first. The
term "rhetoric" for this emphasis on advanced linguistic proficiency is hardly
necessary, but some distinguishing term is needed in the face of recent
success by linguists in appropriating such traditional terms as "grammar",
"syntax", "linguistic" for exclusive use in designating formal, or would-be
formal, conceptions. "Rhetoric" by no means implies a rejection of formal
linguistic principles, but it does clearly imply a concern with semantic
principles as well.[4]

Indeed, though not the primary goal of the present work, one of its
secondary purposes is to explore the significant area of discontinuity between
the formal features of language and the semantic interpretations that can
vary from one syntactic context to another. This is not to deny the significant
area of conformity, but simply to point out the futility of that academic
endeavor that claims to be free of 'unscientific' semantic interpretations.

The linguistic point at which the semantic and the formal are most nearly
coextensive lies on the border between the traditional areas of grammar and
rhetoric: the independent assertion. The unfortunate result of reducing rhetoric
to grammar has been the failure to develop a consistent system of linguistic
analysis applicable to extended discourse. In one sense there is nothing new
in taking the assertion/sentence as the fundamental linguistic concern, yet it
is also reasonable to claim that what has never been precisely delimited has
never been clearly understood. The current intellectual fashion espousing
intuition as the foundation of knowledge (following Husserl's phenomenology)

is no substitute for definition and classification. The justification for develop-
ing a generative rhetoric is to bring clearly into focus the assertion — its
primary components and the characteristic ways that multiple assertions
combine to form extended discourse. To publish the bans for a marriage
between grammar and rhetoric is not, however, to acquiesce in the easy
characterizing of grammar as formal and rhetoric as semantic. If grammar and
rhetoric are to be treated as one flesh, then grammar will have to be *both*
formal and semantic.

The great need is to bring to the teaching of rhetoric the rigor of
grammatical analysis. To meet this need, generative rhetoric must avoid on
the one hand the vacuous generalities about different kinds of discourse and
varieties of style that have characterized so much rhetorical teaching and on the
other hand the atomistic reductionism that has prevented grammatical study
from ever coming to practical grips with extended discourse. Generative
rhetoric is not primarily concerned with different kinds of discourse and
different kinds of meaning but with what all extended discourse has semantic-
ally in common. We will obviously not be content with a conception of
meaning as simply the other side of the formal coin; yet we will be too
prosaic to equate linguistic or assertional meaning with all the implications
that can be drawn from a discourse. Semantics is not hermeneutics.

Thus at the foundation of our generative rhetoric is what can only be
termed a "semantic grammar". It is semantic because it seeks to establish
the most adequate interpretation of assertions as they can or do follow one
upon the other in extended discourse; it is a grammar because these inter-
pretations are based on systematic distinctions manifested within each
individual assertion. What precisely these systematic distinctions are is partly
a matter of necessary agreement among the various grammatical theories that
have flourished over the millenia, but partly it is still a matter of legitimate
debate. For example, this semantic grammar, like transformational-generative
grammar, is a return to the traditional subject-predicate conception, which
has been in eclipse during the first half of this century as a result of the
rebellion against the unrealistic dictates of proponents of Aristotelian logic
and Latin grammar. But unlike Chomsky and his followers, we view this
bipartite distinction not as primary but as merely preparatory to the more
crucial distinction of subject and attribute, which is not necessarily bipartite.
The importance of assertion modifiers, which include among other things
traditional 'direct objects', is thereby emphasized. And, correspondingly,
the grab-bag concept or category of 'adverb' is much reduced and the precision
of semantic distinctions thereby enhanced. As part of this de-emphasis of the
subject-predicate distinction, semantic grammar de-emphasizes 'immediate
constituent' analysis. Instead of a 'cutting away' or 'peeling off' of modifiers,

with little regard for their semantic relationship to the core assertion, we give primacy to distinctions of kind (restrictive and non-restrictive) and function (sub-assertional and assertional) and treat different modifiers differently.

Because the field of grammar is still as much a matter of arguments about adequacy as it is a matter of evidence for truth, there is much to be said for eschewing the handbook or encyclopedic approach to organization. To the extent that the 'facts' (a much over-used term in recent work) in this field are still in important respects matters of hypotheses and selective emphases for different purposes, one presents a grammar most responsibly by arguing for it step-by-step — presenting it discursively as well as schematically. At this stage in the development of 'modern grammar' the grammarian cannot avoid presenting his case. He can only choose to do it overtly (and attempt to be as readable as possible so as to facilitate legitimate disagreement) or to do it covertly (and attempt to obscure the hypothetical nature of his position by means of jargon and arbitrary symbols). No system of linguistic analysis will become established that is not comprehensible to those whose task it is to teach it, at the elementary as well as the advanced levels.

To minimize as much as possible, however, the factionalism that has always been a feature of language study, whether as philology or linguistics, we will reserve our analysis of Chomsky's theory for another volume. Fortunately for the field, the common subject matter guarantees a significant core of agreement, whether the latest 'discovery' is Jespersen, or Sanctius, or Dionysius Thrax. It is both disconcerting and reassuring to recognize the great amount of repetition from one generation of linguists to the next. The grammar of a language is not an arbitrary collection of information about miscellaneous patterns of usage. Behind all the various grammar books for a given language is a discernible, systematic phenomenon.

Every language is *systematic*, but none constitutes *a system* — a consistent, coherent, and unchanging body of rules for making or recognizing utterances. Despite their familiarity with the fact that all languages are in a constant state of change, linguists have tended to think that it must be possible to isolate at a given moment in space and time *the* system of rules that is responsible for a given language. Yet even at a given moment in space and time a language consists of a cross-hatching of two principal systems as well as of dozens of minor, only partially realized, patterns.

Languages are commonly divided into two grammatical types: (1) the inflectional, or synthetic — which makes basic distinctions by incorporating information into root words — and (2) the positional, or analytic — which makes basic distinctions by arranging separate words in different sequences. This division does not mean that there is or can be a language that is entirely one or the other. As contemporary linguistics has emphasized, English, unlike

Latin — which was traditionally used as the model for constructing English grammars — has a predominantly positional grammar. So fragmentary and inconsistent have English inflections become, study of them is more a matter of lexicology than of grammar. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that English does have inflectional features, and while these are not numerous as to kind, they are as to occurrence and play a role in practically every utterance. A person could never use English idiomatically without an extensive familiarity with its patterns (and pitfalls) of inflection. But while familiarity is essential, rules are practically worthless — so extensive are the exceptions. Separate words and varying word order is in English the basic means for making distinctions.[5]

Just the opposite point can be made in regard to a predominantly inflectional language such as Classical Latin or Old English. Though here the chief means of showing what words went together was by matching their forms, word order also played a role in practically every utterance, even if the distinctions it made were not numerous and thus were more or less taken for granted.

Whether a language is predominantly inflectional or positional clearly makes a difference in how best to lay out its grammar graphically. But no such *systematic presentation* can in any case give a *complete account* of any language because to make explicit the one system is necessarily to distort and reduce the other. An inflectional system must be presented paradigmatically, as in the conjugations and declensions of Latin; a positional system must be presented diagrammatically, as in many contemporary analyses of English and in the semantic grammar of English that follows here.[6] What shows up clearly in a paradigm is lost in a diagram and vice versa. A grammar, like the transformational-generative kind, that tries to incorporate the two systems succeeds in elucidating neither.

Making a grammar is like making a map. The first thing the cartographer has to do in making a map is to be clear on the kind of task he wishes to perform. Then he must determine what kind of projection best fulfills this task. One projection will give a highly accurate and useful map of area but vastly distort proportion. In order to make an accurate projection of proportion on a particular map the cartographer will have to sacrifice the accuracy of area representation. The distortion of proportion and area simply cannot be overcome together through any single projection. Yet cartography is not any less a responsible, systematic, and valuable endeavor for all that it is unable to provide principles for producing one perfect, all-purpose map. Like a map, a grammar is an abstraction. This does not mean it abstracts form from meaning for the general purpose of study, for this makes no sense and cannot really be done. What grammar does do is abstract certain matters of the

relationship between form and meaning in a particular language for some particular purpose, the formulation of which will then be the fullest and most systematic formulation of those patterns for that purpose. In the formulation of a grammar, complete explicitness would be neither useful nor possible, any more than it would be in the formulation of a particular instance of language.

Once we have understood just what grammar can not do, we are in a better position to appreciate the importance of what it can do. The capacity of a semantic grammar to identify — and clarify the relationships among — all the assertions of any piece of continuous discourse is surely as significant as and must be more useful than pursuing the will o' the wisp of completeness, of 'things as they really are'. If a semantic grammar is not an all-encompassing system, it nevertheless is and must be systematic. The system-making excesses of contemporary linguistics have been salutary insofar as they have focussed attention on the need for introducing order into the interminable enumerations of data that characterized the work of their predecessors. Though a grammar cannot be a system, it cannot be a grammar unless it is systematic.

Because the pie of language can be cut in many different ways but in only one way at a time, whenever we find ourselves confronted by an incongruity between form and meaning, we will maintain our consistency by emphasizing the meaning and minimizing the form. This emphasis is not, however, a panacea; the analysis of meaning always involves varying degrees of disagreement. And arguments about meaning cannot fail to be manifested in arguments about grammar. This is especially conspicuous in attempting to decide what do and do not constitute the individual assertions, between which are to be found the inter-assertional questions. The distinction between stated and implied assertions is crucial, but it is not thereby always an easy one to make. (Certainly it is more crucial and more difficult than the superficial notion of 'deep structure' can account for.) The traditional grammatical distinction between restrictive and non-restrictive modification is a place to begin; but traditional grammar has had nothing *per se* to offer about implication, which at best has been the province of traditional rhetoric and thus tied to distinctions of different kinds of discourse, style, audience, occasion.

Another conspicuous problem in the relationship of meaning and grammar is the preliminary question of what, if any, are the basic cognitive categories that correlate with ordinary usage. But strange as it may seem, such a question has hardly even been broached yet. This is freely admitted by transformationalists (e. g. Chomsky), anti-transformationalists (e. g. Sigurd and Derwing), and neo-transformationalists (e. g. Labov) alike:

We are still at a rudimentary stage in our understanding of the syntactic component, and we have practically no understanding of the semantic component.[7]

How do we determine what the semantic relationships 'in a language' really are? In more general terms, Sigurd asks: "Which units should be grouped as variants of one invariant? How great a formal and semantic variation should we allow? Should passive be grouped with active in spite of formal and semantic . . . differences? Should *the green book* be grouped with *the book that is green*? Should *That he came was nice* be grouped with *It was nice that he came*? Should *Eliot refused the offer* be grouped with *Eliot's refusal of the offer*?" (1970, p. 17). These questions are fundamental, and we need answers to them *before* such issues as the evaluation of alternative linguistic descriptions can be taken seriously.[8]

Our knowledge of the cognitive correlates of grammatical differences is certainly in its infancy . . . . At the moment we do not know how to construct any kind of experiment which would lead to an answer; we do not even know what type of cognitive correlate we would be looking for.[9]

In the last quotation Labov is pointing out the futility of trying to test the logical grammatical proficiency of children when we do not even know what the children should be expected to know. To refer to the present work as an "experiment" constructed to discover the answer would smack of the scientistic. It is by no means clear that such problems are really amenable to experimentation. But certainly the hypothetical possibilities need to be consistently outlined and exemplified in detail. *The Grammatical Foundations of Rhetoric* is thus a determined effort to outline and exemplify a set of basic cognitive categories that do in fact correlate with English grammar as it is actually employed in the making of precise intellectual distinctions in sustained discourse.

Yet, a word of caution is needed here. The general semantic categories employed in this book are offered as useful devices for interpreting the meaning of various sorts of utterances. They are not offered as a significant new discovery but simply as a refinement of very old and widely used concepts whose usefulness has been proven by time. Whether we are translating from language to language or composing in one language, we must come to terms both with specific meaning and with general kinds of meaning. What, as a bare minimum, are these general kinds of meaning? One answer is the distinction between fact and fiction.[10] Another answer is the distinction between question and answer. Another is the six semantic kinds of assertions outlined in Chapter 2. Another is the four kinds of inter-assertional relations outlined in Chapter 6. These will certainly not solve all the problems of translation and composition, but they will certainly prove more useful than the futile search for a non-existent mathematical deep structure.

What claim to originality the present work may have is in minimizing the traditional distinction between grammar and rhetoric without thereby reducing rhetoric to grammar. Rather, it cuts off at one end the study of atomistic units

such as phonemes and morphemes, and at the other end it cuts off the study
of different kinds of discourse. What is left, however, is the very large and
fundamental area of different kinds, structures, and relationships of assertions.
The scope of the present work thus extends from restrictive and non-restrictive
modifiers within sentences to complete compositions that function as re-
joinders to other complete compositions. But at every level, from the modifier
on up, it is possible to discern — either explicitly or implicitly — the eliciting
and answering of questions.

By keeping to this middle ground, we may of course simply fail to gain the
goals at either end. It goes without saying that a middle-of-the-road position
will not, on the one hand, solve the mind-body problem for philosophy or lay
the foundation of a formal science of language; nor will it, on the other hand,
reveal the mysteries of effective communication. We can hope, however, to
lift the teaching of linguistic proficiency out of the realm of fads and intuition,
where it continues to be as deeply entrenched in the post-Chomsky era as it
was in the pre-Chomsky era.

NOTES

1 "On the Place of Style in Some Linguistic Theories", in *Literary Style: A Symposium*,
ed. Seymour Chatman (London and New York, 1971), p. 58.
2 *Linguistic Units and Items* (Berlin, 1976), p. v.
3 In his *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Philadelphia, 1972), pp. 252-58.
4 For a detailed analysis of the basic inadequacy of transformational-generative grammar
in particular and formal grammar in general see my *The Limits of Grammar: A Primer
for Linguists* (forthcoming).
5 The problems and patterns of inflection in English are treated in detail in my
Introduction to Semantic Grammar (forthcoming), a textbook that attempts to bridge
the gap between traditional, Latinate grammar and assertional or rhetorical grammar.
6 The diagraming system employed in this book resembles in some superficial respects
the much maligned and contemptuously dismissed Reed-Kellogg system. Without
wishing to defend the details of that system, we predict that with greater historical
perspective, linguists will come to see in the development and pedagogical implementa-
tion of that first thoroughgoing diagrammatic grammar one of the major achievements
of modern linguistics. For a relatively unbiased discussion of the Reed-Kellogg system
and its fate at the hands of contemporary linguists see H. A. Gleason, Jr. , *Linguistics and
English Grammar* (New York, 1965), pp. 142-51.
7 Noam Chomsky in his interview with Ved Mehta, originally published in the *New
Yorker* and collected with other interviews as *John is Easy to Please* (Penguin, 1974), p.
164.
8 Bruce L. Derwing, *Transformational Grammar as a Theory of Language Acquisition*
(Cambridge, 1973), p. 167.
9 William Labov, "The Logic of Nonstandard English", *Report of the Twentieth Annual
Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Studies*, ed. James E. Alatis
(Georgetown University, Washington, D. C. , 1970), p. 24.
10 For this distinction, which is not treated in the present work, see my *The Phenomenon
of Literature* (The Hague, 1975), esp. Chaps. II and III.

PART I

SEMANTIC GRAMMAR

1. THE SENTENCE AS DIALOG

From time to time the special skill that written composition requires — the
ability to convey meaning without the aid of responsive listeners — strikes
some people as constituting an excessive demand and limitation upon their
desire to communicate. At such a time, consequently, writing comes under
attack as being too impersonal and rational; the hope is expressed, even the
prediction made, that the future will see the supplanting of written discourse
by more intimate verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. This age
of attempted universal literacy is just such a time when there exists vociferous
discontent with the written word and all its consequences.

Those who find writing a definite aid to their intellectual endeavors, how-
ever, may be comforted by the fact that this discontent manifests itself at
just those times and places where the rudimentary skills of literacy have come
to be taken for granted as a birthright. It is only then that the intellectual
responsibility that accompanies the privilege of being able to 'publish' one's
thoughts may begin to chafe. It is only then that the frustration that grows
out of trying to be understood may end in a refusal to be understandable.

The Greek world of the fifth century B. C. was another such age. The
alphabet had been invented by the Greeks some time between the eleventh
and eighth centuries. And since it was much simpler than any other system
of writing that had ever been developed, the advantages of literacy were soon
enjoyed by a substantial portion of Greek society. By the fifth century
written discourse had become sufficiently commonplace for even contem-
porary speeches to be frequently drafted in writing. As a consequence, how-
ever, the disadvantages of literacy also were felt, and a great deal of dispute
occurred about the comparative merits of speaking and writing. Such disputes
naturally involved the usual paradoxes. Just as today English professors write
books against reading and in print advocate the disappearance of print, so in
fifth-century Athens public speakers wrote speeches against writing speeches
and in published pamphlets advocated extempore speaking.

The most well-known of these criticisms of written discourse are to be
found in the writings of Plato. Plato's spokesman, Socrates, is portrayed
as claiming that the only proper mode of discourse among free, intelligent
human beings is dialog by means of mutual question and answer, which he

refers to as dialectic. Dialectic is said to provide the only genuine method of
finding out what the participants really think and actually know. "The trouble
with writing", Plato has Socrates declare in the *Phaedrus* (275d),

is that it is like painting. The creations of the painter have the appearance of life, and yet
if you ask them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. So it is with written discourses.
They indeed seem to talk to you, as though they were intelligent. But if, in order to
understand what they say, you ask them a question about it, they just go on telling you
the same thing forever.

Taken literally this criticism is scarcely disputable. One cannot ask of a
composition what it means in any way that will elicit an answer different
from what the composition already says. Yet Socrates' objection is well-taken
only so long as the unique character of written discourse is not fully under-
stood and exploited by those who engage in it. For a written discourse, if
properly composed, *can* tell you what it means and in much the same way
that dialog, or dialectic, conveys meaning – by raising questions and giving
answers to them.

Formally, of course, there is scarcely any resemblance whatever between
a dialog and a composition. The majority of compositions contain few explicit
questions and scarcely any of the so-called 'sentence fragments' that con-
stitute the typical direct answer in a dialog. On the other hand, a live dialog,
of even the most prosaic kind rarely contains anything *but* explicit questions
and their 'fragmentary' direct answers. If composition is dialectical in method,
it is nevertheless not dialogal in form.

This difference in form derives from the fact that in a live dialog the burden
of exposition or argument by means of question and answer is distributed
between the participants, whereas in a composition the burden of this
discourse rests upon one person alone – the composer. This means that,
while the basic semantically complete unit of discourse in a dialog will be an
explicit question *plus* a direct answer, in a composition the basic semantically
complete unit of discourse will be an answer that contains its question – that
is, an assertion. Composition is 'composition' by virtue of the fact that it 'puts
together' in subject-attribute assertions what in conversation is separated by
the speakers – the raising of the questions and the rendering of the answers
to them.

A.   THE NATURE OF THE SENTENCE – SEMANTIC AND FORMAL

A specific understanding of how compositions convey meaning dialectically
may best be acquired by looking into that ancient preoccupation of gram-

matical study – the definition of the sentence. At the beginning of his own attempt to delineate the nature of the English sentence, C. C. Fries pointed out that the grammarian finds himself already confronting more than two hundred different definitions.[1] Such a plethora has forced many to wonder whether, since it seems impossible to conclusively identify, there exists such an entity as the sentence. Yet the reason that grammarians felt obliged to persist in trying to define the sentence in spite of their lack of success is that without some idea of a basic syntactic unit of discourse the study of grammar can scarcely exist.

A grammarian may formally proceed in his analysis of a given language by starting out with specifying the smallest meaningful units in that language, such as phonemes, morphemes, words. But these units are recognizable and characterizable as such only because they appear arranged and combined in discourse. The grammatical study of the arrangement and combination of these meaningful units is often distinguished as a branch of grammar called syntax. All grammar, however, is really syntax because all subdividing of these arrangements and combinations derives from some implicit, if not expressed, conception of what delimits them. Neither the parts of speech nor the parts of the parts of speech can be isolated without identification of the 'speech' unit that they are part of. Grammar, like any responsible study of phenomena, can analyze – break down into parts – only what has been built up. And if this holds for grammar, it also holds for developing principles of composition. In order to write we have to be able to discern what is put together, so that we can understand and, if necessary, improve and clarify the arrangement and combination.

So essential is some concept of a basic syntactic unit of discourse to the study of grammar that, in the absence of a satisfactory definition of such a unit, the contemporary transformational-generative grammarian tries to get around the problem by claiming that the entire grammar of a language constitutes a definition of the sentence in that language. This question-begging notion of definition, which has been borrowed from logico-mathematical theory, should not recommend itself to anyone hoping to develop principles of composition, because it assumes as given precisely what the teacher knows is lacking and wishes he knew how to impart. According to Chomsky,

A grammar of a language . . . attempts to account for the native speaker's ability to understand any sentence of his language and to produce sentences, appropriate to the occasion, that are immediately comprehensible to other speakers although they may never have been spoken or written before.[2]

While the positing of such a speaker may be convenient to the hypotheses of linguistics, he doesn't sound like a person any of the rest of us knows. For

the teacher of grammar and rhetoric "sentences, appropriate to the occasion, that are immediately comprehensible" are not an object of study but a goal of effort. In the ideal world of the linguist we are all immediately comprehensible, but in the real world we have not only to learn how to make such sentences but also to recognize when we are not making them.

Moreover, as is also apparent from Chomsky's remark, the transformational-generative grammarian *does* start out with a concept of the sentence; he simply wishes to avoid taking responsibility for it because he is not able — at least within his narrow conception of grammar as "autonomous and independent of meaning"[3] — to justify his concept and his use of it as opposed to any alternative one. Other contemporary grammarians, such as H. A. Gleason, Jr. , even when not totally committed to transformational-generative grammar, are inclined to agree that, "The sentence is probably undefinable, short of a very extensive set of statements — a whole grammar, in fact . . . . It would seem best to abandon the attempt . . . ."[4] One has to go back to Fries for the last genuine attempt at definition. Nevertheless, grammarians of every persuasion go on and talk about "the sentence" although not even one "whole grammar" has yet been constructed. In sum, they all know what a sentence is, they just can't explain it.

There is no dearth of definitions, however, as we have seen, and some of the ones still current have been around for a very long time. The definition found in school grammars today — "A sentence is a group of words that expresses a complete thought" — goes back at least to Dionysius Thrax, who in his brief grammatical sketch of Greek, written about the end of the second century B. C. , was merely summarizing the commonplaces of previous centuries. And despite the great variety of definitions put forward since, the majority are only variations on this theme by Dionysius Thrax. That is, they derive from the attempt to specify "completeness", to determine what makes for the unity of the unit. Furthermore, there is, after all, a finite number of possibilities as to what constitutes the completeness of an instance of language. It can be considered complete by virtue of its content or meaning *or* by virtue of its structure or form.

The traditional conception of the sentence most prevalent among grammarians was summed up by Fries:

For centuries it has been insisted that, for completeness, every sentence must have a word representing a person, place, or thing, and also a word 'asserting' or 'saying something' about that person, place, or thing. There must be a 'subject' and a 'predicate'. (p. 14)

The criteria of subject and predicate are obviously semantic criteria since they are to be identified in terms of their meaning or content, of their making an

assertion *about* someone or something.

Difficulties arise, however, because the grammarians who apply this definition do not want nevertheless to recognize as sentences some groups of words that fully satisfy these criteria. Consider the example, "My hard-working father is tired". It contains a word representing a person, "father", but two words that assert something about the person, "hard-working" and "tired". No traditional grammarian would be willing to identify the phrase "my hard-working father", however, as a sentence, although he would identify "My father is tired" as one. Yet the one is obviously as *semantically* complete as the other: the transposition of the subject and attribute and the addition of "is" to make "My father is hard-working" adds absolutely no *information* whatsoever to "my hard-working father". On the other hand, "who the man saw" contains both a subject, "the man", and a full predicate, "saw", and yet it too would be denied sentence status. Clearly, in identifying sentences the traditional grammarian is using some additional criteria not included in his definition.

To compound the difficulties of defining, the grammarian does treat as sentences one kind of word group that is obviously semantically incomplete because it contains no subject — the imperative. The traditional way of regulating this inconsistency is to declare the subject understood. Thus "Wait a minute" is to be understood as "You wait a minute", with "you" as the subject and "wait a minute" as the predicate. Fries takes issue with this traditional account on the grounds that "Nothing in the criteria furnished in these definitions gives us any indication of a limit to the number or the kind of words that may be 'understood' " (p. 16). But this objection is quite beside the point and misleads Fries in his own search for the defining features of the sentence. For even in the full expression, "You wait a minute", "you" is not functioning as the subject — not in the way that the subject functions in all other kinds of assertions, whether sentences or not. This becomes evident if we try to substitute a noun or proper name for "you": "Boy/Mother/Sam wait a minute". In each of these examples the first term is functioning as a direct address, just as "Mother" does in "Mother, Father said to wait a minute", and is not the subject of the verb at all. It must be concluded that imperatives do not assert anything about anything. They express a desire for certain behavior just as questions express a desire to know something, but neither imperatives nor questions make a claim, true, false, or hypothetical, about the world.

To Fries, and other descriptive (or non-semantic) grammarians, the source of these difficulties seemed to reside in the very nature of trying to define the sentence as a grammatical unit *"by way of the meaning or thought content"*.

Most of those who have sought to define the sentence . . . have tried to find universal
characteristics of meaning content for this speech unit — characteristics that could not
only be identified in the utterances of all languages, but would serve also as defining
criteria of the sentence in any language. (p. 18)

Since this approach has never succeeded in coming up with a definition that
is either analytically applicable or even theoretically acceptable, Fries and his
colleagues concluded that a semantic definition of the sentence is impossible.
They took therefore an intentionally opposite approach. They abandoned
the effort to define the sentence in terms of semantic completeness and in a
way that would be valid for all languages. For semantic completeness as the
characteristic of the sentence in every language they substituted formal
independence in each language. "The more one works with the records of the
actual speech of people", Fries concluded,

the more impossible it appears to describe the requirements of English sentences in
terms of meaning content. It is true that whenever any relationship is grasped we have
the material or content with which a sentence can be made. But this same content can
be put into a variety of linguistic forms, some of which can occur alone as separate
utterances and some of which always occur as parts of larger expressions. (pp. 18-19)

A sentence according to this conception then will be simply whatever forms
can occur alone as separate utterances.

This conception also, like its semantic counterpart, led at once of course
to grave inconsistencies. Statements, imperatives, greetings, calls, questions,
and answers to questions were all identified as sentences because they do
occur as separate utterances. Yet no distinguishing feature could emerge from
this grouping if for no other reason than that "Answers to questions may
consist of practically any linguistic form of the language" (p. 165). Therefore
it is untrue to say that some linguistic forms can occur alone as separate
utterances and some always occur as parts of larger expressions and there-
fore that we can distinguish as sentences those that occur alone. Answers to
questions occur alone and yet may take practically any linguistic form. This
means that practically no linguistic form can be identified as occurring only
as part of a larger expression, for few cannot occur alone as the answer to
some question.

In sum, according to this conception practically every linguistic form can
be a sentence. This rendered a distinction of the sentence on a formal basis
impossible. At best the structuralist (the descriptive grammarian) has a vast
inventory of the forms that can or do appear as lone utterances. He is in the
position of a cook who has a list of ingredients but no recipe. What is he
supposed to make of all these items? The formalist approach leads to a

proliferation of grammars as each man tries to find out what kind of recipe can be worked up with all these ingredients. Individuality being what it is of course, none can agree, for indeed, given the size of the inventory and the absence of any conception of a delimitable unit of which the forms would be constituents, the possibilities are almost endless.

In an attempt to salvage the concept of formal independence we might ask if occurring as the answer to some question is really occurring alone. Can an answer to a question actually be said to be formally independent? Of course the answer to this question is both yes and no. If by independence is meant being uttered by a single speaker, then most answers to questions *are* formally independent. If by independence is meant being formally identifiable, then most answers to questions *are not* formally independent. As Fries himself admitted, although answers to questions

are independent in the sense that they are not included in a larger structure by means of any grammatical device, their own structural arrangements have significance with reference to the questions that elicited them. In other words, the question itself is part of the frame in which the answer as an utterance operates. (p. 165)

The criterion of formal independence as the defining feature of sentences turns out to be as ambiguous and indefinite as that of semantic completeness.

Despite their inability to find a formula for the sentence, modern grammarians of every persuasion have nevertheless continued to insist that the sentence cannot be defined semantically. Granted. But then neither can it be characterized formally. Would it not be reasonable to suppose at this stage that grammarians are putting a false dilemma? Why should it have seemed reasonable to Fries and his colleagues that since a purely semantic definition did not work, a purely formal one would? It should be just as reasonable, if not more reasonable, to conclude that a sentence is a formal semantic (or semantic formal) unit rather than either one or the other.

Such a conclusion would require, however, abandoning the attempt to identify the notion of sentence with that of utterance. An utterance, or instance of language, is simply an instance of language. One can imagine a situation in which almost any expression in the language can be uttered by a single speaker. A request for a clarification of a mumbled syllable may elicit in reply nothing but a more distinct enunciation of that syllable. Identification of sentence with utterance can never lead to the systematic distinguishing of a basic unit of discourse. When Fries decided to take recorded telephone conversations as the source material for his analysis of English, he was already guaranteeing the occurrence of more formal and semantic explicitness than would have been the case if those conversing had been face

to face.

As it turns out, furthermore, when sentence is identified with utterance, no means can be found to consistently classify the independent forms — the greetings, statements, calls, answers, commands, requests — that are all covered by this identification. Fries purported to establish these subclasses of utterance on the basis of the kind of response each elicits. But answers already form an exception to this grouping because they of course are themselves responses. Less superficially apparent but more important is the fact that the subdivision, "statement", is not really identified this way either. Statements are described as

Utterances regularly eliciting conventional signals of attention to continuous discourse (sometimes oral signals, but of a limited list, unpredictable in place, and not interrupting the span of talk or utterance unit). (p. 53)

That is, the kind of response that a statement evokes is no response at all; the listener merely refrains from interrupting. Thus, what a statement or series thereof amounts to is nothing more specific than an uninterrupted flow of discourse. Fries never determined what a statement is but only what it is not: it is not a response and it does not elicit one. Yet, of those parts of the recorded conversations supposed to be distinguishable according to response, statements are said to constitute more than sixty percent (p. 51). Therefore more than half the material distinguished this way — and thus a sizable proportion of utterances occurring in the English language — is never clearly delimited and described by Fries' principles.

Must not this mass of negatively defined, unclassified instances of language be just what the grammarians have been seeking to define all along — the sentence? A sentence, whether it occurs in writing or in speech, is recognizable as *an utterance that is both semantically and formally complete*. It is identifiable neither as a 'quest' (or 'request') nor as a response to one. The reason that a sentence cannot be identified either as question or as response is because it is at the same time both. That is what makes it complete.

In order to see what enables sentences to function this way let us examine briefly a few examples of language that might be considered sentences and see how they differ.

(1)   "Could you have left at eight? "
(2)   "Yes".
(3)   "I want to know if you could have left at eight".
(4)   "I could have left at eight".

Neither of the first two examples is a sentence. One asks a question: the other answers it. But though they are both independent, neither asserts anything. "Could you have left at eight? " is formally independent in that it is uttered by a single speaker and is formally identifiable in English as a question, but it is not semantically complete. For although it contains a word construable as referring to a person, "you", it contains none that asserts something about that person. Although it does contain the phrase, "you left", and though *this* expression does contain a formally possible subject and predicate, the utterance as a whole does not assert it. The utterance as a whole, indeed, implies quite the contrary to "you have left": the person addressed neither left at the time specified nor at the time of the utterance. The second example, "Yes", obviously lacks even the elements with which an assertion could be made and does not make one, despite the fact that *in its conversational context* it could mean exactly what example (4) asserts.

The next two examples, on the other hand, are both sentences, even though example (3) could be used to ask a question and example (4) to answer it. "I want to know if you could have left at eight" is not basically a question – though it could give rise to an answer – but is a formally independent and semantically complete assertion. It does not assert anything, however, about anyone's ability to have left at eight; it only asserts that someone ("I") "wants" something – in this case information – and only answers the question "What do I (you) want? ", which may have been explicitly raised by someone else or implicitly raised by the speaker alone. Similarly, "I could have left at eight" answers the question "Could you have left at eight? " but it need not follow and be a response to such an explicit question because, unlike "Yes", it makes both the question raised and the answer given manifest by asserting something, "could have left", about a subject, "I".

All four examples are formally independent, but each of the second two, unlike the first two, answers at least one question that they implicitly raised and is thus semantically complete. That is, neither example (1) nor (2) makes an assertion; both examples (3) and (4) do. Thus we can say that a sentence – as differentiated from a question, an answer, a call, etc. – is *a unit of discourse that makes at least one formally independent assertion.*

This conception of the nature of the sentence enables us to see both why the traditional definition of the sentence as expressing a complete thought has persisted so long and why it is inadequate. It has persisted because it does define a recognizable, basic unit of language. But it is inadequate because it is not a definition of the sentence. What makes for semantic completeness is an assertion. It is the assertion that is the basic unit of meaningfulness in discourse. But assertions can not exist independent of some form, and the forms they appear in are sentences. Thus the sentence does have universal character-

istics of meaning content, as earlier grammarians thought; it makes assertions. But it is also true, as Fries and his contemporaries thought, that it is impossible to describe the requirements of English sentences or those of any language in terms of meaning alone.

Assertion and sentence then are not to be identified. A sentence is a sentence by virtue of making at least one assertion that is formally independent in a particular language. But, on the one hand, other assertions may in addition occur in the sentence, and these need not be formally independent. On the other hand, a sentence need not but usually does contain more than assertions. It may, for example, include inter-assertional connectives ("and", "but", "therefore", etc.). The syntactical conventions by means of which assertions are integrated into complex sentences will vary from language to language, but what is common to all languages is the existence of conventions for doing this.

Since asking, commanding, asserting are fundamental semantic uses of language, it stands to reason that every language has specific forms for serving these functions. These uses constitute the commonality of language. The enormous diversity of languages stems from the vast range of formal possibilities available for performing these common functions. Every language by virtue of being a language enables its speakers to use all the fundamental kinds of statements, but the ways these are made will differ arbitrarily and unpredictably from language to language, however consistent and systematic they should prove to be within each language.

One way to make this distinction between semantic commonality and formal uniqueness is to say that grammar is the study of the uniqueness of individual languages. If this is so, then rhetoric — conceived as implied question and answer discourse — is the study of what all writing, irrespective of the different languages used, has in common. A rhetoric will, of course, necessarily be laid out in one language rather than another, because rhetorical analysis presupposes the ability to do syntactical analysis — to discern subjects and attributes within assertions and different assertions within complex sentences. But insofar as implied dialog is our primary concern we might use Basque just as well as English.

B. THE NATURE OF DIALOG — QUESTION AND ANSWER

If dialog used sentences to ask questions and sentences to answer them, it would be impossibly redundant and long-winded. And not only would such explicitness be superfluous, it would also be difficult to understand. In actual dialog question and answer fit like hand and glove and are thus easy to keep

track of as the discourse shifts back and forth from speaker to speaker. In a live, oral situation, the listening participants might forget what the question or the answer was by the time it was paid out in sentence form. When, however, the dialog becomes a monolog — the conversation, a composition — the explicitness of assertions and the sentences that make them is exactly what is needed; it is in fact what makes 'one-sided' communication possible.

At the same time, neither explicitness nor concision can be independent virtues but exist in proportion to each other. Both monologs and compositions must also have means of achieving some economy of expression along with the necessary explicitness. If every assertion were made in an independent form, neither monolog nor composition would be possible to follow even when written. Continuous discourse, therefore, possesses the means of making assertions that are not sentences, that are formally dependent on an independent assertion and yet are semantically complete.

An example of a formally dependent assertion in an English sentence was actually given earlier. We saw that, although the phrase, "my hard-working father", in the sentence, "My hard-working father is tired", satisfies the definition of the sentence as expressing a complete thought, traditional grammarians did not in practice identify it as a sentence. The reason that they did not is that, although not part of their definition, they were in practice using the criterion of formal independence — in addition to semantic completeness — to identify sentences. "My hard-working father" in the sample sentence does express a complete thought and is thus an assertion, but it is not formally independent of the assertion "My father is tired" and is thus not a sentence. This particular means of presenting a dependent assertion in addition to an independent assertion in a single sentence is just one of several ways of presenting assertions precisely and yet concisely in continuous discourse.

Not only are there other ways of integrating multiple assertions into a single sentence — such as compounding and apposition — but also, it is important to realize, not every instance of pre-positional modification is an instance of a dependent assertion. "Younger" in "My younger [as opposed to my older] brother is tired" is restrictive and therefore is not making an additional assertion. Acknowledgment of this difference among pre-positional modifiers constitutes a recognition that not even grammar can be made up of formal distinctions alone. And when we step almost inevitably into the realm of rhetoric — of extended discourse — then even the semantic interpretation of individual assertions is not enough. In the sentence, "My hard-working father is tired", there clearly exists an implied semantic relationship between "hard-working" and "tired" that is not indicated by the grammatical form. This semantic relationship is obviously different from that between "hard-

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working" and "never has any money", in the sentence, "My hard-working father never has any money", and may be indicated by turning each sentence into a dialog:

Q. How's your father?   *Q*. Can't you get the money from your father?
A. Tired.   *A*. My father never has any money.
Q. How come? /Why?   *Q*. Doesn't he work?
A. He's hard-working.   *A*. He's hard-working.

The first expresses a simple causal relationship: "My father is tired because he is hard-working"; the second expresses a disclaimer that leaves the way open for another question: "My father never has any money, even though he works hard (because my mother spends it all)".

Because, then, form and meaning are two distinct aspects of the composition of sentences, it is necessary to be able to identify each assertion, whether dependently or independently expressed, in order to see what questions are raised and how they are answered. The grammatical, or better, syntactical, basis of rhetoric is the principles of sentence structure — conceived as the rules for the integrating of multiple assertions into single sentences.

Here is a brief example of a composition:

Not every legitimate problem is properly understood in scientific terms. The problem of teaching composition, like the problem of establishing national languages, is frequently misrepresented as essentially scientific. Scientific problems, ones that can be solved by discovery, are primarily matters of research; however, problems like composition are primarily matters of competing value judgments. These are often swept under the rug with the broom of "more research" but can never be solved this way. Only when agreement is reached on the goal of composition teaching will it be possible to study fruitfully different means to the end.

Here are the sentence patterns by means of which we discern multiple assertions integrated into single sentences — with simple structure in the first and last sentences, non-restrictive modification in the second and third sentences, parallel structure in the fourth sentence, and both compound structure and appositive parallelism in the third sentence.

1. Not every legitimate problem is properly understood in scientific terms.

2. The problem of teaching composition, ⌈ like the problem of establishing national languages, ⌉ is frequently misrepresented as essentially scientific.[5]

3. Scientific problems,

[ones that can be solved by discovery,] ⊳ are primarily matters
of research;

however,
problems like composition are primarily matters of competing value judgments.

4. These ⟨ are often swept under the rug with the broom of "more research"
but
can never be solved this way.

5. Only when agreement is reached on the goal of composition teaching will it be possible to study fruitfully different means to the end.

And here are the nine assertions that 'compose' the composition, together with the questions that are implied by them:

Not every legitimate problem is properly understood in scientific terms.

What, for example, is thus misunderstood?
The problem of teaching compositions is frequently misrepresented as essentially scientific.

Is this the only such pseudo-scientific problem in the area of language?
The problem of teaching composition [is] like the problem of establishing national languages.

What characterizes true scientific problems?
Scientific problems [are] ones that can be solved by discovery.

What characterizes non-scientific problems?
Problems like composition are primarily matters of competing value judgments.

Aren't these often treated scientifically?
These are often swept under the rug with the broom of "more research".

Are they never solved?
These can never be solved this way.

What, then, is required?
Only when agreement is reached on the goal of composition teaching will it be possible to study fruitfully different means to the end.

Notice that the questions are not 'transformations' of the assertions. Rather, each question is determined as much by the succeeding assertion as by the

preceding one. The question, just as in the dialog depicted above, indicates the relationship *between* two assertions. Among the possible questions reasonably raised by an assertion, the composer who knows what he is doing chooses the one question whose answer will most directly lead to the point of his composition. Of course the example presented here is an oversimplification. The composer may wish to take up more than one question raised by a particular assertion. But he can present only one answer at a time. Therefore, some matter in such a case will have to be deferred to a later point in the sequence of assertions. Or a composer may decide to ask an explicit — rhetorical — question, for which he may or may not provide an explicit answer. No matter what complexities or subtleties are developed, however, the basic process remains the same. The meaning of a composition is the sum of its individual assertions as linked together by the inter-assertional relationships, and these inter-assertional relationships are the sum of the implicit questions and the explicit answers. To be able to discern these questions is to be able to read comprehendingly and to write so as to be comprehensible.

Individuals can, if they like, take it upon themselves to discourse. Instead of waiting to be asked about our opinions or knowledge or behavior, we can speak right out. But if we do, we take it upon ourselves also to make perfectly clear what questions our utterances answer and what ones they do not, even as we are keeping them concise enough to be grasped as a whole. If the reader or listener thinks the writer or speaker is speaking to a different point or cannot tell for certain what point he is speaking to, meaning will of course not be conveyed and communication will not occur. Speaking to the point means both putting the questions that would be raised by others and answering them. With such discourse as this, whether written or spoken, even Socrates would be satisfied.

NOTES

1 *The Structure of English: An Introduction to the Construction of English Sentences* (New York, 1952), p. 9.
2 Introduction to Paul Roberts, *English Syntax: A Programmed Introduction to Transformational Grammar* (New York, 1964), p. ix.
3 Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague, 1957), p. 17.
4 *Linguistics and English Grammar* (New York, 1965), p. 330.
5 The basis of our system of diagraming is the sentence written in an unbroken line from beginning to end. Exceptions to this linear arrangement indicate different grammatical features. However, limits imposed by page size require compromises (as with this sentence, which should be just one line with an internal bracketed clause).

2. THE MEANING OF ASSERTIONS

The basic rule of thumb in constructing both sentences and paragraphs is that
these are organizational units made up of two or more subordinate units. The
basic unit of the paragraph is the sentence, and only exceptionally do we find
in sophisticated expository and argumentative compositions single-sentence
paragraphs. (The indenting of individual sentences in newspaper stories is a
special case resulting from the need to compensate for the problems created
by the narrow column format; it is not primarily a matter of organization, and
these single-sentence units are not strictly speaking paragraphs because they do
not differ from the sentences that constitute them.)

Similarly, the basic subordinate unit of the sentence is the assertion, and
only exceptionally do we find in sustained non-fiction compositions single-
assertion sentences. When used infrequently, single-sentence paragraphs and
single-assertion sentences are a means of emphasis; they stand out in contrast
to what is expected. But the basic function of the sentence and the paragraph
is organizational, and what is organized is individual assertions. The first step
in organizing a string of assertions is to incorporate them into sentences; the
second step is to incorporate the sentences into paragraphs. One is not, how-
ever, in a position to do any structural organizing until he has first under-
stood the semantic nature of the assertion.

Unlike predominantly inflected languages (e. g. Latin), where a single word
may function as an assertion, predominantly positional languages (e. g. English)
distinguish between basic semantic units and basic syntactic units. An English
word, and even morpheme, is meaningful and thus a semantic unit, but it does
not 'say' anything: it can make no claim. It is therefore not the basic rhetorical
unit. An assertion may consist of one word (a combined subject and predicate),
as it can in Latin, or it may consist of at least two (separating subject and
predicate), as it does in English; but nothing smaller than an assertion is
meaningful by virtue of saying something.

Assertions are not *composed of* subassertional units in the way that
paragraphs and complex sentences are composed of assertions; they are the
indivisible molecular unit Assertions can, however, be *analyzed into* sub-
assertional units — as molecules can be analyzed into atoms and subatomic
particles. But just as the assertion is not the smallest semantic unit, neither are

the basic subassertional units (subject and predicate) the smallest semantic units. The smallest analyzable units of meaning (morphemes) are not in and of themselves of assertional significance — which is not, of course, to deprecate in any way the study of them. If it is correct to say that the nature and function of molecules can not be determined or explained merely by analyzing subatomic particles, then we can say that the smallest units of sound (phonemes) and sense (morphemes) are the subatomic particles of linguistic phenomena. But to be an essential ingredient of a phenomenon is not to be a miniature of it. And to possess a complete inventory of the ingredients is neither to have nor to understand the finished product.

The systematicness of semantic grammar is dependent on more than the traditional distinction between subject and predicate. The concept of subject can be taken as sufficiently self-evident for the moment, but the concept of predicate, derived from predication, is little more than a redundant indication that we are dealing with an assertion: to predicate is to assert, and to assert is to predicate. A more useful distinction, at least for the purpose of semantic grammar, is between subject and attribute. The subject/predicate distinction is useful because it is exhaustive: there is nothing left over after the subject and predicate of an assertion have been removed. But the subject/attribute distinction, though not exhaustive, is useful because it allows us to discern more readily the different *kinds of meaning* that assertions can have.

Semantic grammar, unlike for example transformational grammar, has a *core* conception of assertions rather than a *bipartite* conception. Parts of many assertions are neither subjects nor attributes but assertion modifiers. The core of an assertion is the headword (or phrase) of the subject and the headword (or phrase) of the attribute, and (if present) the intra-assertional link. This much is the core because it is sufficient to reveal — quite independently of any subject, attribute, or assertion modifiers — the membership in one of the semantic classes. All assertions have two primary components, subject and attribute, and in the great majority of English assertions these two components occur in this order. But in addition, some kinds of assertions have a separate, intra-assertional link between the two. The core of an assertion is the unmodified attribution of a *function*, a *nature*, or a *class* membership to a thing. The subject is the thing that is described or classified; the attribute is the description or the class. To assert is to attribute, to claim (correctly or incorrectly, reasonably or unreasonably, with or without qualification) that a thing *does* something, that it *is* something, or that it *is classified as* something.

All subjects are things; an attribute may be a function, a nature, or a thing (but always only a class). In one sense there are only two categories of attribution: *thing/description* and *thing/thing*. But in another, and perhaps more

precise, sense all attribution is best considered as description, and descriptions then are seen to be of three types: *thing/function, thing/nature, thing/class*. To fully understand this, however, we must make a complete inventory of the semantic possibilities for assertions. What are all the possible kinds of attribution that can be claimed of a thing?

Below are the six semantic classes of assertions and the six different diagrams into which all assertions can be fitted. When we discuss the types of formal structure, in the next chapter, there will be a second set of diagrammatic distinctions, and when we discuss modification, there will be a third. Thus the diagram of a complex sentence will show three kinds of things: the assertions, the ways of formally constituting these assertions, and the modification by which the assertions are elaborated. And, finally, the analysis of modification will be expanded by means of dialog to include the ways that assertions modify each other — within a single sentence and between sentences. This will enable us to diagram not only sentences but paragraphs as well. But in introducing the basic semantic distinctions among assertions, we shall ignore structural complexity and minimize as much as possible the complexities of modification.

Assertions can be analyzed both semantically and structurally — in terms of the kinds of meaning and in terms of the ways that the meaning is presented in relation to other assertions. The one ought reasonably to precede the other, however, because the concept of structure is a dependent one. Language is by its very nature semantic; structural elements are simply those linguistic elements that are explicable apart from the meaning of particular assertions — although not apart from the knowledge that they constitute assertions. Meaning cannot exist without structure, but how an assertion is structured has no bearing on the kind of meaning it has.

Of the three types of assertional structure (*independent, parallel*, and *modificational*) only the first will be used in this chapter to exemplify the six semantic classes. And of the two types of independent structure (simple sentences and complex sentences) only the first will be used. A simple independent sentence is a single subject and a single attribute constituting one and only one assertion. Such an assertion is not part of a parallel construction creating another assertion, is not subordinate to or dependent on another assertion, and does not include as part of itself any modification that creates additional subordinate or dependent assertions. There are actual two- and three-word sentences that are as simple as these diagrams, and furthermore every complex sentence is at the core (or when reduced to the bare bones) one of these same six simple assertions.
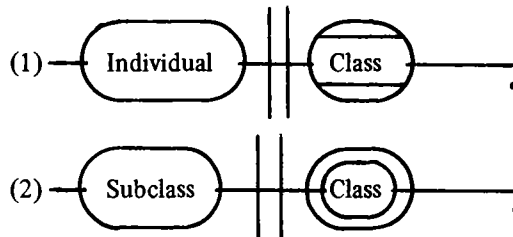
A. DESCRIBE SUBJECT BY FUNCTION

(1)

(2)
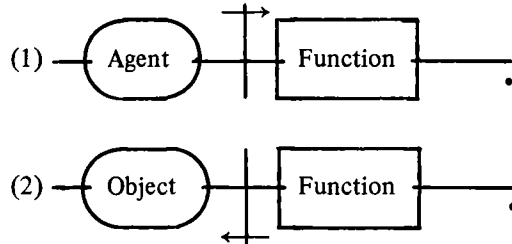
B. DESCRIBE SUBJECT BY NATURE

(1)

(2)
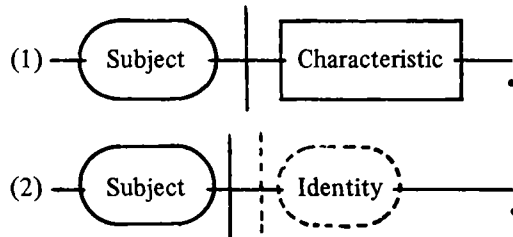
C. DESCRIBE SUBJECT BY CLASS

(1)

(2)

As the diagrams reveal, our semantic distinction of subject/attribute cannot be equated with the traditional bipartite distinction of subject/predicate. For function and nature assertions the two may (in the absence of assertion modifiers) be coextensive, but for classifying assertions they can not be. Quite apart from the problems created by assertion modifiers, it is as misleading to reduce all assertions to a two-part subject/predicate pattern as it is to expand them all to a three-part thing/relation/thing pattern. The core of function and character-istic assertions is always bipartite: