

## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON PLAYING TAG

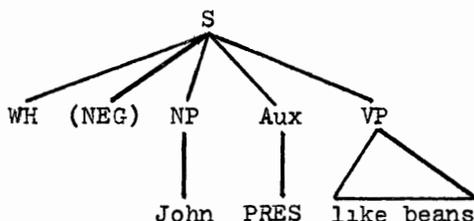
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In the last decade there have been various attempts to account for tag questions such as (1a,b) within the framework of transformational grammar.

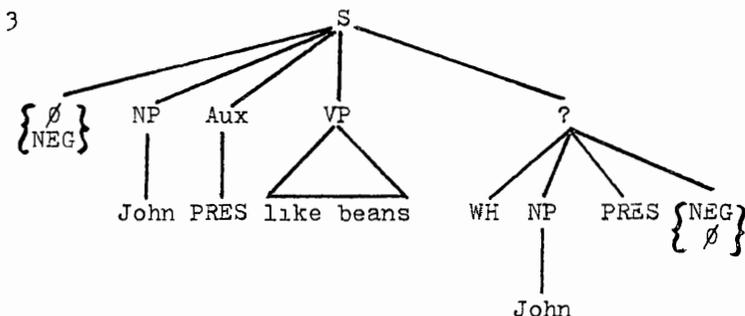
- 1a John likes beans, doesn't he?  
b John doesn't like beans, does he?

These attempts have been of at least two types, which I will call the copying analysis and the adjunct analysis. In the copying analysis one posits a rule of TAG FORMATION that operates on roughly the following simple yes-no question structure underlying the above two sentences:<sup>1</sup>

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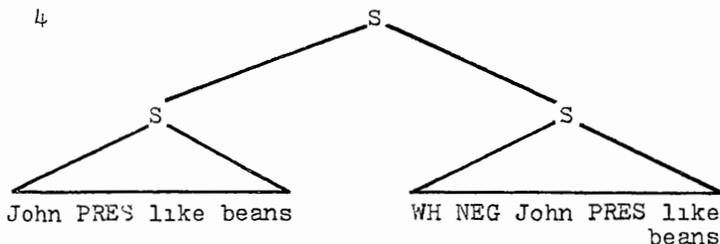


TAG FORMATION copies to the right of this structure either the subject NP or a pronoun corresponding to it<sup>2</sup> and the first auxiliary (that is, tense and the first of any following auxiliary elements). The rule also moves WH from the main clause to the tag and inserts NEG in the tag if the source is affirmative.<sup>3</sup> Structure (2) thus becomes structure (3) on the next page, which by other straightforward rules gives (1a,b).



In the copying analysis we can find some hand waving as to whether the tag elements in structure (3) form a constituent and if so, what. I think it is clear that the tag is a reduced sentence, but to say so within the rule TAG FORMATION itself would add considerably to the power of transformational grammar--a step in precisely the wrong direction. I will return to this point below

The other common analysis of tag questions involves a source with two adjuncts, as in structure (4) underlying sentence (1a) 4



Here we do not need a distinct rule TAG FORMATION. The reduced structure of the tag in surface structure is accounted for by the independently motivated rule VP DELETION, just as in (5) on the next page, except that

in tags the rule is obligatory, not optional.<sup>5</sup>

- 5a John can go and Mary can too.
- b John ate the beans although Mary didn't want him to.
- c John has been eating at the place where Mary has.

In structure (4) there is claimed to be some motivated basis for our intuition that the tag elements form a constituent, that they are an S, that inversion is as in independent questions, and so forth. What is not so clear in this type of analysis is just how we can constrain the principles that specify structure (4) as well formed.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, (4) has a lot to recommend it. To name just one aspect of the problem, notice that the surface structure location of NEG within the tag is ad hoc within most of the copying analyses but accounted for on independent grounds in the adjunct analysis (see note 3).

To extend the discussion somewhat, consider the tag imperatives in (6).

- 6a Eat some beans, won't you?
- b Don't be late, will you?

These sentences are sometimes derived by a generalized version of the rule that gave us the tag questions in the copying analysis above.<sup>7</sup> Although I have never seen one, it is easy to imagine a corresponding adjunct analysis involving an imperative structure on the left and a suitable yes-no question structure on the right. Again, independently motivated rules could be made to account for the final shape of the tags.

A further type of tagged sentence has received little attention in the literature.<sup>8</sup> I refer to "declarative tags" such as (7).

- 7 John ate some beans, he did.

Certain difficulties aside, it should be clear that a slightly altered rule of TAG FORMATION could handle declarative tags in the copying analysis. Since the source would have no WH to trigger inversion, we end up with declarative word order in both the main clause and the tag. Similarly, one can imagine an adjunct analysis involving two identical underlying clauses, each of the shape  $s \sqrt{\text{John PAST eat some beans}}_s$ .

Let me now consider in somewhat more detail yet another type of tagged sentence, a "threatening tag" such as (8).

8 Eat my beans, will you?

This sentence is to be distinguished from the superficially similar imperative tag in both intonation and meaning. If (8) were an imperative tag, the tag itself would most naturally begin on a pitch level slightly higher than that on which the main clause ends, and it would then rise to about the level of the principal stress of the main clause. This intonation would resemble that shown in (9).



9 Eat my beans, will you?

The intonation I intend for the tag elements in sentence (8) as a nonimperative threatening tag continues the lowest pitch of the main clause, rising only slightly at the end. This "flat" threatening tag intonation contour may be represented as something like (10), and occurs in sarcastic or belligerent tags such as (11) as well.

- 10 Eat my beans, will you?  
 11 John ate my beans, did he?

The meaning of threatening tags is not easily characterized. At some point in the derivation of sentence (10) the subject of the main clause must be you, just as in the tag. In other words, we want the facts of (12) to be expressed as the facts of (13).

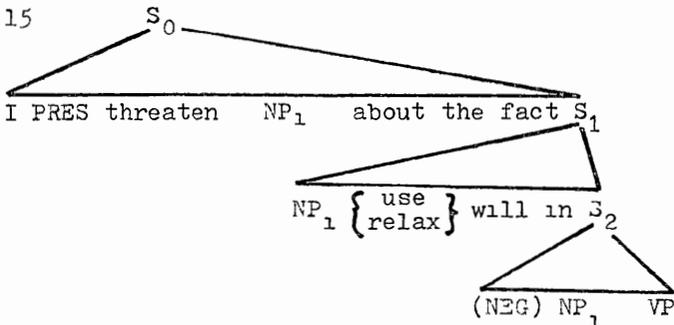
- 12a Fix it themselves, will  $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{they} \\ *she \\ *he \end{array} \right\} ?$   
 b Do her own work, will  $\left. \begin{array}{l} *they \\ she \\ *he \end{array} \right\} ?$   
 c Stare at himself all day, will  $\left. \begin{array}{l} *they \\ *she \\ he \end{array} \right\} ?$
- 13a  $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{They} \\ *She \\ *He \end{array} \right\}$  fixed it themselves.  
 b  $\left. \begin{array}{l} *They \\ She \\ *He \end{array} \right\}$  did her own work.  
 c  $\left. \begin{array}{l} *They \\ *She \\ He \end{array} \right\}$  stared at himself all day.

Is there a will present in the main clause of sentence (10) at some level of analysis? The fact that will occurs in the tag is of course not evidence that it is ever present in the main clause. And consider the rather curious fact that the sentence is very naturally felt to be about somebody already having eaten my beans, and not about some act of eating to take place in the future. How are we to reconcile this past-time reading with the occurrence of will in the tag and possibly in the main clause as well?

The modal will can of course express simple futurity. It also can have a number of senses closely related to futurity, such as prediction, supposition, and concession. But will can have senses even further removed from the temporal, as in the following sentences (from Frank 1972):

- 14a Some will praise from politeness; some will criticize from vanity. (inclination, tendency)
- b Boys will be boys. (obstinacy, insistence, willfulness)

These sentences approach the sense of will in threatening tags, in which the modal can be seen as related to the noun will with its sense of volition, purposefulness, and determination, rather than to the temporal modal will. Thus, what really has to be accounted for in threatening tags is the lack of overt tense marking on will and in the main clause, and not the occurrence of this will per se. I will return to the lack of main clause subject and tense below. In the meantime, we might posit structure (15) as a reasonable representation of the meaning of threatening tag sentences.



Notice that  $S_1$  in structure (15) includes both the use and the relaxation of will. In order to utter a

threatening tag by the rules of conversation, a speaker must believe that NP<sub>1</sub> in (15) is capable of controlling his own behavior. Many times, of course, the context will be sufficient to suggest that NP<sub>1</sub> in fact fully meant to do whatever he did, thus provoking the uttering of the sentence. On the other hand, it is not strictly speaking necessary to believe that NP<sub>1</sub> acted willfully. Interestingly, I can use sentence (10) believing that you should have had enough control over the situation, your body, etc. not to accidentally eat my beans. In fact, the word "accidentally" seems to occur in threatening tags without disrupting grammaticality.

16 Accidentally break my best vase, will you?

The extent to which the acceptability of threatening tags seems to depend on one's expectations about NP<sub>1</sub>'s ability to control the situation (that is, on beliefs about the world, in the largest sense) is amply illustrated by the following sentence, in which rather extraordinary powers are attributed to the addressee:

17 Be officially dead for six hours before the doctors could finally fix their machines and bring you back, will you?

But does this mean that grammar and knowledge of the world are indistinguishable? I do not think so, for there are counterexamples to the generalization that the acceptability of a threatening tag depends on how much control people can be expected to have. From the point of view of expectable control, (18) should be a good sentence.

18 \*Have lost three games by noon, will they?

As far as I can see, there is nothing strange in the belief that a team should not have lost three games by

noon, especially if one has some idea that the team may have lost on purpose or through negligence.<sup>9</sup> Thus the situation where I might use (18) is straightforward, even though the sentence turns out to be glaringly unacceptable. So, I believe, is the following:

19 \*Be tracking mud on the clean floor, will he?

Now the fact that both (18) and (19) contain stative verbal elements might be thought to contribute to their unacceptability, but it turns out that statives abound.

- 20a Happen to end up in the riot, will you?
- b Be seen coming in at 4:00 AM, will she?
- c Have more anger than respect, will they?
- d Know Homeric Greek better than me, will he?

I have no idea how to account for these facts other than by an ad hoc list. (And I would expect rather large variation in this list from speaker to speaker.)

Another possible restriction for threatening tags has to do with time adverbials. Consider the following sentences:

- 21a Kick my door yesterday, will you?
- b Make fudge later tonight, will you?

Despite some first impressions to the contrary, I now believe that these sentences are perfectly acceptable.<sup>10</sup> Sentence (21a) seems fine as a delayed reaction, so to speak. The acceptability of (21b) can be seen, if we recall my earlier suggestions about the semantic contribution of will, as dependent on one's ability to view the making of fudge at a later time as an established fact. That is, if I fully believe that someone intends to act against my wishes, then I have part of the context necessary for properly uttering a threatening tag.

The distribution of these time adverbials, however, is not generally free, for these elements may not occur at the beginning of the main clause.

- 22a \*Yesterday(,) kick my dog, will you?  
 b \*Later tonight(,) make fudge, will you?

This follows from a wider restriction barring the occurrence of any moved material at the beginning of threatening tags.

- 23a \*Carefully, open the door, will they?  
 b \*Turkeys detest, will you?  
 c \*In the park(,) dance a jig, will you?

But notice that material occurring at the beginning of the VP in underlying structure does not contribute to ungrammaticality, since this material has not been moved (or if so, only by rules applying much earlier in the derivation than those involved in (23)).

- 24a Carefully open the door, will they?  
 b Recklessly smash the box, will you?  
 c Simply adore it, will they?  
 d Unexpectedly show up at the cabin, will he?

Returning now to an earlier question, how are we to account for the absence of main clause subject and tense in all these sentences? It might be suggested that the independently motivated rule whose effects we see in (25) is also responsible for threatening tags.

- 25 Eat my beans!

To be sure, this rule would have to be generalized to apply not only in imperative contexts but in these other sentences as well. However, there is strong evidence

that the rule operating in (25) most likely cannot be responsible for threatening tags. The negation of (25) is (26a), but the negation of threatening tag (10) is (26b)

- 26a Don't eat my beans!
- b Not eat my beans, will you?

Clearly, some process other than IMPERATIVE YOU DELETION is at work here. If we assumed an underlying present tense marker, then a modified copying analysis could neatly remove the main clause material (subject NP, tense, and modal will) without getting into problems with do. But I think we would be avoiding this difficulty at too great a cost. We would have to either allow transformations to build in the tag structure in ad hoc ways, or posit some general theoretical convention whose effect would be to build in (free to the grammar of English) all the appropriate constituent structure 11. Each of these devices, other things being equal, is a worsening of general theory since each allows a larger class of derivations than a general theory without these abilities. To be preferred is an analysis in which the tag is a constituent with such-and-such properties just because it is a constituent with such-and-such properties. To a reasonable extent, this is exactly what is involved in the adjunct analysis. What is totally unaccounted for in either the adjunct or the copying analysis is the relationship between the structure of a threatening tag at some intermediate point in the total derivation and the far more abstract semantic representation offered in (15). Whether or not we want to call a structure roughly like (27) a deep structure in the technical sense, there is reason to suspect that something like it must be related in some way to structure (15). This I am unable to do in any motivated way

27  $\begin{matrix} \text{S} \\ \text{S} \end{matrix} \begin{matrix} \text{S} \\ \text{S} \end{matrix} \text{you (Aux?) eat my beans} \begin{matrix} \text{S} \\ \text{S} \end{matrix} \begin{matrix} \text{S} \\ \text{S} \end{matrix} \text{If you will eat} \\ \text{my beans} \begin{matrix} \text{S} \\ \text{S} \end{matrix} \begin{matrix} \text{S} \\ \text{S} \end{matrix}$

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See, among others, Klima 1964, Emonds 1970, Culicover 1971, Akmajian and Heny 1975. In some copying analyses a declarative rather than interrogative source is posited. In this case TAG FORMATION must either accomplish inversion in the tag outright or else add WH to "motivate" inversion.

<sup>2</sup>Klima 1964, for example, states TAG FORMATION so that the feature  $\overline{+PRO}$  is added to the copied subject NP. Clearly, his rule needlessly duplicates PRONOMINALIZATION in this effect. A copying analysis involving a semantic interpretation rule PRONOMINALIZATION runs into the same problem of duplication. Tags are ungrammatical with full NPs and the pronoun occurring there must (not may) be coreferential with the main clause subject. Thus special mention must be made of tag environments and one way or the other this special mention overlaps with the statement of PRONOMINALIZATION required on independent grounds.

<sup>3</sup>Culicover 1971 has an interesting but questionable attempt to account in a different way not only for this reversal of polarity but also for the position of NEG in the tag. Taking structure (2) as source, his TAG FORMATION rule applies in such a way that the familiar NEG PLACEMENT, following it, can move NEG either into the tag for sentence (1a) or into the main clause for sentence (1b). In case the source has no NEG to move, Culicover derives a sarcastic or belligerent tag such as (i).

i John eats beans, does he?

Clearly, Culicover's analysis cannot account for the two occurrences of NEG in (11), which many people find perfectly grammatical.

ii John doesn't eat beans, doesn't he?

<sup>4</sup>I do not mean to imply that structure (4) is the deepest source of sentence (1a). For analyses along these lines, see Moravcsik 1971, Pope 1972, Stockwell et al. 1973

<sup>5</sup>To my knowledge, the formalization of this restriction has never been commented on.

<sup>6</sup>In an analysis with a well defined level of deep structure, we could liberalize the phrase structure rules as follows:

$$S \rightarrow ( \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{and} \\ \text{or} \end{array} \right\} ) S^n \quad (n \geq 2)$$

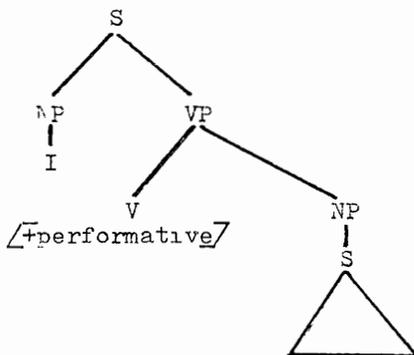
$$S \rightarrow ( /H ) ( \text{NEG} ) \text{NP Aux VP}$$

etc.

The first rule says that conjunctions are optional, so we could derive tag questions and ordinary conjoined clauses from essentially similar sources. Clearly, however, there are several difficulties here.

In an analysis with no level of deep structure, we have a comparable problem. Lakoff 1969, for instance, does not show how to derive a surface structure tag question from her underlying source structure (11).

11



One possibility is to map (11) onto structure (4) by some as yet unknown rule or rules, then to proceed as I do in the text.

<sup>7</sup>See Arbin 1969 for criticism of this position

<sup>8</sup>The only discussion of these sentences, so far as I know, is included in Armagost 1972, my unrevised MA thesis

<sup>9</sup>Palmer 1968 notes that the occurrence of perfect aspect in imperatives does not seem to lead to any special problem semantically. I do not know whether this fact is related to the fact that perfect should be good in threatening tags, but is not.

<sup>10</sup>I cannot account for why these sentences seem to sound bad at first hearing. To say that they aren't used very much and hence sound awkward answers nothing, of course. Why aren't they used very much?

<sup>11</sup>As in Chomsky 1957, where it is suggested that

If X is a Z in the phrase structure grammar, and a string Y formed by a transformation is of the same structural form as X, then Y is also a Z.

Technically, of course, this won't work for the tags. Since these lack the VPs required by the phrase structure rules, they will not be consistent with any rules that tell us what an S is. Less radical weakenings of general theory can be articulated. Emonds 1970, for instance, proposes various structure-preserving constraints, though not in the particular context at issue in the present paper.

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