

WHERE DID SEMANTICS COME FROM AND WHAT IS IT ANYWAY?

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Recently, in conjunction with other research, I had occasion to work through two traditional grammars¹ of Kurukh, a North Dravidian language. One was written at the turn of the century and one was written about 1924. The authors were both missionaries and judging from their work had a traditional classical education.

In considering these grammars, it is possible to say, as people often do, that the authors have "mixed" semantic and surface structure criteria in the ordering of their data. When one says this, it is an imposition of a metric which does not seem to be present in their work. They, quite likely, assume only one level, not two. That is, they believe in the "logic" of language and that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the surface structure and semantics.

Only if one separates semantics and considers it as mapped upon surface grammar does the lack of isomorphism of the two systems become clearly apparent. Having noted this, it becomes evident that from time to time grammarians like those noted above, use first one, then the other criterion in doing their analysis. It depends, perhaps, upon which features are most striking in a given case. All of the time, they seem to believe themselves to be using only one criterion. It is quite apparent that the pre-structural view of grammar, as identical with logic, is at play, though I can't comment as to whether the investigator resolves the cases of inconsistency with himself or completely fails to see them in the frame of reference he is using.

In general, however, the separating of the two systems tends to support a view of semantics and surface structure not being isomorphic in every domain. Modern linguistics has long recognized this. Various "schools" have reacted to this recognition in a range of ways.

On the one hand some, such as the neo-Bloomfieldians, concerned themselves primarily with finding a system of interrelationships in the surface syntax. Though they recognized the level of semantics, they considered it to be an inaccessible "mental" entity which was not in their domain of endeavor. In their view it would behoove anyone who tried to investigate semantics to get on with the proper business of linguistics.

The endeavor to describe surface interrelationships eventually included an attempt to make broader connections over longer and longer utterance domains. This made necessary a search for deeper connections, since surface levels do not provide strong relations over those longer domains.

It would appear that Chomsky's original plunge into generative

grammar was of this nature. He noted, in fact, in the introduction to The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory² that his work was an outgrowth of his search for a satisfactory discourse-length syntax. He was truly in the tradition of neo-Bloomfieldian linguistics in that he avoided the mentalism of semantic considerations at all costs. In 1955 and 1957³ he made it clear that semantics was another enterprise, depending upon a satisfactory syntactic description.

This venture of Chomsky's, however had the effect of moving linguistics beyond the consideration of surface structure as the only object of linguistics inquiry. By gradual steps, the inquiry turned to sub-surface considerations to such an extent as to border upon neglect of surface realizations. The number of categories of the base component decreased. The complexity of the transformational component increased. Surface structure became less and less a constraint on the shape of the statements in the relational system.

As this became more and more true, other constraints on the well-formedness of relational statements were brought to the fore, especially those psychological and physiological considerations having to do with the nervous system, and the outer limits of possible human utterance. Thus statements like, "All languages have recursive embedding" can be justified on the basis of extra linguistic human factors. This represented a break-through of sorts, subsuming a new domain under linguistic inquiry.

However, research pushed the inquiry on to such abstraction that it became necessary to seek further constraints on deep structure. Without such constraints the elements and relations of the more abstract base component had little reality, since the constraints of surface structure were relaxed.

At that point a jump to the considerations of semantics was possible. With the deep connections thus given a new interpretation, (that is a semantic one), investigation of their structure opened a new domain in which to search for isomorphism. While it was more tenuous than overt grammar, it was certainly a more satisfying enterprise than reliance on the very distant surface syntax. If the structure of semantics could be found in any sense, it was, by the nature of its interconnections, the relations underlying spoken language. This jump thus provided additional ways to investigate these connections. Before, there were only surface syntactic considerations, along with relatively ill-defined biological outer limits, to provide constraints on the shape of deep grammar relational statements. Now these must correspond with what we know or can discover of the underlying semantics, or cognition, of the speakers. This has, in some sense, roots in the speaker's world view.

A new question is opened, however. The jump to semantics was made within the context of formal logic. Various attempts to modify formal logic have been proposed, McCawley's⁴, for example. But there are underlying assumptions involved, for example, that something closely akin to formal logic will suffice to describe, say the world-view of the speaker. Additionally, the common American linguistic

assumption of the additive nature of the lexical value of morphs is taken without question.

We can note that semantic inquiry, say of Goodenough, Morris, and Osgood, has taken a good many different forms, depending upon the background of the investigator. We then might look at the current enterprise.

It would appear that the present shape of semantic inquiry by linguists may be an accident of its history, not a necessary form.

NOTES

1. Grignard, A. 1924. A Grammar of the Oraon Language and Study in Oraon Idiom. Calcutta: Catholic Orphan Press
and
Hahn, Ferd. 1900. Kurukh Grammar. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariate Press.
2. Chomsky, Noam 1955. The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory. Cambridge: MIT Libraries (microfilm).
3. Chomsky, Noam. 1957. Syntactic Structures. *Janua Linguarum* #4. The Hague: Mouton and Co.
4. McCawley, James A. 1967. "Meaning and the description of languages" in Kotoba no Uchu. Tokyo: Kotoba no Uchu.