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THE PRAGMATICS OF SUBORDINATION
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If we conceive of discourse as a cooperative activity, one of the responsibilities to be divided between (or among) the participants is that of the determination of meaning. As a convention, we often think of the "meaning" of a text as located in, and wholly determined by, that text itself; but in fact, participants have a great deal to say about what a text, spoken or written, "means," and who is responsible for putting the meaning in it -- the utterer or the recipient.

Evidence for my position can be found in the fact that different cultures, and therefore different languages, utilize linguistic devices to locate the responsibility for meaning with one participant or the other; and while participants themselves are usually unconscious of this fact, their communicative strategies, including numerous details and choices of grammatical organization, militate in favor of one strategy over another. Within cultures, we find different discourse genres sometimes utilizing different strategies, and variations in grammatical rules and choices from one genre to another can be understood at least in part on this basis. Finally, like other aspects of language, the responsibility for meaning changes over time, influencing changes in other, more purely linguistic, aspects of the grammar. In this paper, I want to talk about some of the ways that languages encode meaning, and how a culture's determination about which participant in a discourse is responsible for its meaning affects the form of its language.

It will be useful to make clear at the beginning what I mean by the "meaning" of a text, as I am using the term in a somewhat special sense, to refer mainly to those aspects of the text that involve connectedness -- between ideas in the text, and between participants in the discourse -- rather than the semantics proper, the relation between words and referents, although it should be obvious that these two components of meaning cannot be divorced from each other.

Meaning, then, can be speaker-based or hearer-based. In a speaker-based strategy, explicitness and clarity are primary desiderata. If something is not understood, the assumption is that the speaker is at fault for not being clear, and could have done better. The language provides many clarifying devices, typically different ones in different genres. (Even in a strongly

speaker-based culture, there may be types of discourse which, precisely for the sake of contrast, are hearer-based. But participants in speaker-based cultures learn these genres later in their education, and often achieve at best a passive mastery of them, if they learn to appreciate them at all.) In such a culture, to be unclear or imprecise, except in a genre specifically allowing it, is to be devious and inscrutable, or to be saying something that requires concealment. Imprecision, then, is marked.

In a hearer-based culture, on the other hand, ambiguity and imprecise statement are valued in even the most informal and common types of discourse. To be perfectly clear is to appear childlike, or insulting. There may be speaker-based genres in these cultures, though they are not the same ones that are hearer-based in the speaker-based culture. Explicitness is marked.

It may be useful to identify these discourse types with politeness strategies I have discussed in earlier work (1979). Speaker-based meaning can be identified with distancing cultures; hearer-based, with deference. In a distancing culture, power is the central issue around which relationships (at least in their early stages) are organized, and locating meaning with the speaker (or, perhaps more accurately, the speaker's production, the text) means that there can be, in normal discourse, no possibility of losing control of the discourse, no chance that meaning will have to be negotiated. In a hearer-based culture, on the other hand, the most desirable strategy will be to leave decisions about meaning, as about so many things, at least conventionally up to the hearer.

To suggest that there are cultures which preferentially are inexplicit about the expression of meaning in discourse calls into question the assumptions behind much pragmatic thought. We have assumed that the Gricean (1975) Cooperative Principle, which holds up as an ideal the most explicit expression of meaning in discourse, is universal in applicability, although different cultures may utilize it more or less, or in different contexts (cf. Keenan, 1976). But if we can accept the idea that some cultures do not perceive clarity as an ideal or clarity-based contributions as a norm, we have to rethink our assumption of the universonality of Gricean principles, and perhaps conclude that they, like much of our linguistic theory, are based on too little deep observation and understanding of non-Western cultures, and that the CP may be an ideal only in cultures similar to our own.

Perhaps the differences in strategies can be highlighted if we divide languages into four basic

groups, depending on their preferred format for encoding meaning, though the existence of the third is at this point somewhat conjectural. The distinction is based upon the form in which meaning is most typically encoded. Here as elsewhere, by listing a language or culture in one category, I don't mean to suggest that its speakers have no access to any others; merely that this is the preferred or dominant mode.

First, a language may express relationships at the lexical level. This means that it will have a large vocabulary, with words differentiated from each other according to fine points of distinction. Explicitness is achieved in large part by choosing the word or words with just the right nuance to carry the message. English is an example of such a language.

Second, a language may encode meaning at the sentence level, through syntactic strategies. Such a language will develop and make use of a wide array of types of subordination, and will prefer subordinate structure to coordinate, complex sentences to simple or compound. Semantic relationships are encoded in the syntactic structure, in a way that is more explicit than the first type.

A third possible locus for the encoding of meaning is in the text at a higher-than-sentence, or textual, level. Structures analogous to the paragraph will be more useful as organizational categories than is the "sentence." Such languages, in fact, may not have a clear concept of the sentence, but may jump from clauses to larger, paragraph-like units. If there are formal sentences, such languages will incorporate explicit means of connecting them, often in the form of particles that are not lexically definable but serve to connect one idea to the next. Classical Greek seems to work this way, perhaps in combination with other strategies. Some very speculative evidence suggests that modern written French may be at least partially assignable here, or moving into this category. (My very tenuous evidence for this suggestion has to do with the difficulty speakers of English often have in understanding French styles of argumentation: the notion of "topic sentence," so dear to the organizational principles of writers of English prose, seems to play a much less prominent role, leaving the English-speaking reader disoriented.) (I am speaking here of the written, not the spoken, language.) It may well be the case that written and spoken French are more differentiated from each other in this respect than are their English counterparts.

Finally, a culture may go beyond language to the extra-linguistic context to express its meanings: this is what is meant by calling it "hearer-based."

Paralinguistic factors -- intonation, manner of articulation generally -- might be of especial importance as well; but even more would be conveyed by still less explicit cues: eye contact or its absence, stance, gestures. To be linguistically direct and to the point would be childlike or insulting. Particles may play a significant role here too, but in this type of language, the most useful particles would not be those linking idea with idea in a text, but linking one participant with another, clarifying and further defining their relationship. Many Asian languages would seem, according to descriptions given me by their participants, to fall into this category.

This interpretation of the interrelationships of language and culture suggests a difficulty that may arise in second-language learning, when the learner's native language utilizes a different strategy from the language being learned. A speaker of a lexicon-based language will have great difficulty learning to communicate fluently in a context-based language, for instance: everything may be in order as far as vocabulary and grammar, but the result will be wrong; the learner's over-explicitness will often be perceived as a negative aspect of character, rather than a linguistic difficulty.

Although every language employing a hearer-based strategy will do it somewhat differently, each language will devise ways of encoding meaning as, and to the extent that, its speakers wish to encode it. As with other linguistic phenomena, we can expect to find that these strategies, and the means of encoding them, can change over time. The means, we might surmise, are apt to change more easily than the choice of strategies themselves. A hearer-based culture remains one, and a speaker-based culture is similarly constant.

Having proposed these ideas, for the remainder of this paper I want to concentrate on the choices that have been developed by various speaker-based, Western cultures, in order to illustrate how, within a single general cultural context, the same intention can receive a variety of different forms of execution. By examining several languages, we can detect a number of ways in which meaning is, more or less explicitly, encoded. I want to discuss some of these methods and their effects in detail.

At this point, let me recapitulate the strategies I have identified for the expression of meaning in speaker-based languages.

a. a large and finely-differentiated lexicon (e.g., English), a strategy concentrated within the sentence.

b. semantically-defined particles (e.g., Classical Greek, German), especially likely in strategies focusing at levels beyond that of the simple sentence.

c. a great use of hypotactic syntactic structure (e.g., Latin), with attention focused at the sentence level.

I assume that the choice a language makes among these alternatives is not completely random, but controlled at least in part by linguistic facts, historical and otherwise. English happened to be in a position to receive a large influx of vocabulary, at various times, from various sources. This was serendipitous, but the language or its speakers made the choice to utilize the windfall; Latin, which at the time it was acquiring its classical form, did not have access to the same variety of sources (as later on it would), but was able partly because of its complex morphology to exploit complex syntactic patterns for the encoding of meaning. Its morphology enabled it to develop a relatively free word-order (as English could not) and this in turn contributed to its preference for syntactic complexity.²

This interpretation of differing communicative patterns among languages is a way of understanding a curious difference that has often been observed among languages that are exposed to much external influence and pressure. Under these conditions, some are very open to adopting new vocabulary from outside; others resist the tendency. English and Japanese can be cited as examples of the first type, French and German of the second. To some extent, the choice reflects the structure of the potentially borrowing language: a language with complex inflectional morphology, like French or German, cannot accept new words without making great alterations -- either in the newcomers or, ultimately, in their own structure. But English, which does not make sharp differentiations in form among the parts of speech, nor utilize many inflectional endings, can much more readily accept new forms into its repertoire without doing violence to them or to itself. Of course, at the time of the greatest borrowings into English -- the period of the Norman Invasion -- English was still a relatively inflected language, so morphological structure alone cannot be used to explain the tendency toward borrowing or against it. Still, these patterns clearly have some effect on which devices a language is to use as its primary way of encoding meaning. (Why Japanese is so much like English in its taste for lexical borrowing, yet is hearer-based, is unclear to me at present. Presumably the choice to be, or not to be, a borrowing language is based on different

factors in languages of the latter type.)

In other words, we are viewing the three speaker-based techniques mentioned above as communicative equivalents: the lexical choice exemplified by English; particles, as utilized in Classical Greek; and hypotactic, or subordinating, sentence structure, which was especially well-developed in Latin. Since the other strategies are more or less self-evident, I would like to devote the rest of this paper to a discussion of the non-syntactic functions and consequences of maximal hypotaxis, as exemplified in Latin.

Before proceeding further, it would be useful to clarify what is meant by "maximal hypotaxis." Obviously, even the most "paratactic" language has some hypotactic possibilities, and vice versa; arguments by older generations of historical linguists that the earliest stages of Indo-European were exclusively paratactic are based on misunderstandings of grammar or misinterpretation of the data. To some extent, these hypotheses of proto-language parataxis are predicated on an equally invalid assumption of the greater maturity and sophistication of hypotactic syntax -- this in turn based on a perception of Latin as the ideal of the fully-developed language: everything that led to it was "immature," everything developing from it, "decadent." Needless to say, such analyses are based on groundless prejudices.

It is also interesting to notice that, to many traditional grammarians including many current English-language prescriptivists, the use of hypotaxis is seen as the only really respectable way for a language to encode meaning (it goes without saying that speaker-based strategies are the only permissible ones for ethnocentrists like these). Hence the development of new words, or the increasing use of particles like "y'know" are perceived only as marks of deterioration; the true Ciceronian periodic sentence is the apogee to which these experts really aspire, realizing, of course, that it is alas! unattainable in the present parlous degeneracy of the language. Yet, compared to any of the other possible meaning-encoding strategies, syntactic subordination is in a real sense the least sophisticated, if by "sophisticated" we mean indirect, assuming knowledge and skill on the part of participants. Hypotaxis spells relationships out to a greater extent than any other strategy: it is maximally explicit. There is nothing inferior about this, of course: but it is a little ironic that it is regarded as the sign of linguistic perfection and maturity, all others being, naturally, a bit brash and in-subordinate.

Actually, as so often in linguistic description,

to attempt to understand a phenomenon in terms of a dichotomy (here, between paratactic and hypotactic structures) is to oversimplify what is in reality a continuum, along which we can trace at least four major levels in the development of hypotaxis. (I mean here synchronic development, of course; I am not implying that hypotaxis necessarily develops from a historically prior paratactic grammar.)

1. pure parataxis, or side-by-side sentences, with nothing explicitly present to indicate any relationship between them: the hearer must infer the relationship, by a procedure such as described in Harvey Sacks' (1972) rule: "Post hoc, ergo propter hoc." (The first example is likewise borrowed from his paper.)

(1a) The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.

(1b) We planned a picnic. It rained.

2. mixed type (to which I will give the name mixotaxis), with the ideas of relatedness expressed via coordinating conjunction. This is traditionally classed as paratactic, but it should be evident that it is quite different in effect. While mixotaxis does not explicitly state the nature of the relationship between the two conjuncts, it does make explicit its existence, as pure parataxis does not.

(2a) The baby cried, and the mommy picked it up.

(2b) We planned a picnic, and it rained.

As these examples illustrate, there is still a great deal of ambiguity in mixotactic utterances. In a way, this strategy highlights imprecisions of meaning that pure parataxis conceals: the presence of "and" is a virtual red flag, signaling to the hearer, "These ideas are related somehow: guess how!"

3. near-hypotaxis, in which one idea, or clause, is subordinated to the other: not only is the relationship between the two made explicit, but also the exact semantic nature of that relationship: temporal sequentiality, cause, condition, for example. Now, if we are to use examples parallel to those of (1) and (2) above, we will have to decide which of the many possible meanings of each of those sentences we wish to express. A partial selection might be:

(3a) The baby cried before the mommy picked it up.

(3b) When the baby cried, the mommy picked it up.

(3c) The baby cried although the mommy picked it up.

(3d) If the baby cried, the mommy picked it up.

Any of (3) could substitute for (1a), merely specifying its meaning. Another way to put this is to say that, in the appropriate context, perhaps with the help of intonation, (1a) can have any of the meanings of (3a) - (3d) -- and more. This type is normally considered fully hypotactic, rather than an intermediate stage. But it differs from the next category, full hypotaxis, in that its two sentences, or clauses, or idea-units, are still syntactically autonomous, while in the fourth type, one clause is totally subordinated to the other, syntactically as well as semantically.

4. pure hypotaxis, in which the subordinated clause loses its full sentential identity. Now, both syntactically and semantically, the relationship between the two original ideas is one of subordination. By deleting syntactic structure from one member of the pair (and thereby, in a sense, losing meaning, although of course it is normally recoverable), the speaker makes clearer the intent of the communication: syntax serves pragmatics.

(4a) After crying, the baby was picked up by the mommy.

(4b) Because of our planning a picnic, it rained.

One construction in particular can be used to illustrate the claim that Latin especially cherishes subordination, even in circumstances where a less hypotactic language would not use it: the Latin ablative absolute. This is a well-known bane of beginners in the language, not only because it does not readily translate into English, but also because it seems ambiguous in a way the speaker of English is not comfortable with. We are, of course, perfectly prepared to cope with the ambiguity of coordinating conjunctions in Latin, which occur just as they do in English; but the ablative absolute seems to us perverse in that it subordinates, but to no semantic end: it provides no indication, unlike other Latin (and English) subordinating devices, of exactly what the relationship between the clauses is supposed to be. This must be supplied by the reader from context. In meaning, the ablative absolute is equivalent to a coordinating conjunction. But syntactically it seems to the speaker of English to be offering clarification of communicative intention with one hand, and taking it away with the other. Yet if we understand Latin's preference for subordinate syntax, we can begin to understand a preference for hypotaxis even without communicative intent -- an unintelligible combination to a speaker of English.

(5) Caesar, acceptis litteris, nuntium mittit.

(Caesar, the letter having been received, sends a messenger.)

Another construction beloved of writers of Latin can be subsumed under the same explanatory heading -- this too without any equivalent in English. This is the relative pronoun used as a connective -- often translated, at any rate, as a combination of "and" plus demonstrative or personal pronoun. In English, relative pronouns occur only in subordinate (relative) clauses; in Latin, they introduce sentences. Such sentences, very frequent, idiomatic, and impeccable in style, seem to the speaker of English dangerously close to the sentence fragments high-school English teachers warn against. We can understand the frequency of these, too, as attempts to utilize subordinating structure even when there is no desire to subordinate meaning.

- (6) Caesar statuit expectandam classem, quae ubi convenit....
 (Caesar decided that he should wait for the fleet, and when this [lit., which when] arrived....)3

Earlier in this paper, I suggested that even the most militantly speaker-based cultures had forms of communication that were hearer-based. It is probably always the case that "serious" communication in such cultures is maximally explicit (i.e., Gricean): for example, those that hold great significance for the preservation of life, liberty, property, or face of participants. But elsewhere we can afford to be more playful; and going to a hearer-based format is a favorite form of playfulness. Examples are jokes and riddles, which derive much of their point and delight from their contrast with our usual discourse styles, because they make the addressee work harder than usual; and, in writing, poetry, which is always hearer (or reader)-based. (As one poet said,

A poem should not mean,
 but be.)

In traditional prose, fictional and otherwise, the norm has always been speaker-based; but interestingly, during the present century, we seem to be moving however tentatively toward a more hearer-based model, at least in avant-garde fiction. (Stream-of-consciousness is hearer-based.) Descendants of traditional fictional modes, such as pulp fiction, remain speaker-based, as does virtually all prose nonfiction. Therefore it is probably premature, and inaccurate, to say that our culture is changing to one that is hearer-based; rather, those who appreciate hearer-based experimental types of

discourse (not by any means the majority of members of the culture) feel that way in large measure because they take pleasure in experiencing something radically different from the norm.

One final example of a place where speaker-based strategy may be making inroads, perhaps less aesthetically valued, but probably with greater influence, in our culture: the increasing tendency of print advertising to be framed in sentence fragments, each often isolated so as to resemble a conventional paragraph. Such incomplete sentences are, strategically, the inverse of hypotactic structures: they leave a great deal of decoding up to the reader. In this may lie some of their effectiveness: they keep the reader actively participating; and learning theorists know that the best way to ensure learning and memorization is through active participation. One could argue, if one wished to be, or seem, perverse, that advertising is the poetry of our age: while not utilizing the specific tactics of the poetic medium, advertising certainly has adopted poetry's more global strategies; while the communicative intent is in many ways different, both are intended to be maximally persuasive, both working on the intellect via the emotions.

Thinking of discourse strategies in this way raises an interesting point about something often noted in child language. Even in a speaker-based culture, the language of small children looks very hearer-based. Children leave a great deal up to their hearers; they are circumstantial and imprecise. Hearers are expected to do a lot of interpreting -- the younger the child, the more this is necessary. Similarly, children have been observed to be unusually "paratactic," -- more accurately, mixotactic, since they tend to string their ideas together via coordinating conjunction. (This tendency can perhaps be explained, as opposed to pure parataxis, if it is seen as a floor-holding strategy by the less powerful participant in a conversation: interruption is less likely in the middle of a conjoined phrase than between two sentences, at a full stop.) Assuming child language is hearer-based might lead to the conclusion that this type of discourse strategy is, in fact, more "basic" or "primitive." But to make that assumption is to misunderstand the nature of the apparent "hearer-basedness" of children's speech. Discourse can only be truly hearer-based if there is agreement to that effect between participants, utilizing implicitly agreed-upon cues, non-linguistic and non-explicit though they may be. There must be, in other words, an assumption of mutual intelligibility, of non-ambiguity at some level. The child's use of mixotaxis,

then, should not be taken as truly analogous to the unclarity of communication typical in a hearer-based culture: it is reaching toward the speaker-based strategy of the child's own culture, but unable to achieve it.⁴

In this paper, I have suggested that we need to look at a culture's ways of encoding -- or not encoding -- meaning in language as part of its linguistic strategies, an aspect of the pragmatic system that has repercussions in the syntax, and elsewhere throughout the grammar. To understand why languages employ specific kinds of constructions, favoring some ways of expressing things over others, we have to understand these broader and deeper strategies. To assume that syntactic choices are determined purely syntactically, or can be understood without understanding a great deal about other aspects of communicative competence in a culture, is to have only a very superficial understanding of the relation between a language and the people who speak it.

FOOTNOTES

1

An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Language and Reading Development Conference at San Diego State University in March, 1982. Among the many people whose suggestions have improved this paper are: Catherine Davies, Elisabeth Kuhn, Yoshiko Matsumoto, and Margaret Newman.

2 We might contrast the much-noted ability of Latin poetry (as particularly exemplified in the works of Horace) to utilize word-order variations to express what English poetry communicates by a poetic vocabulary much larger and more specialized than that of Latin.

3 The connective relative can also occur in combination with the ablative absolute:

Ratio docet esse deos, quo concesso, confitendum est....
(Reason teaches that there are gods, and once this is granted [lit., which when granted], we must admit....)

4 Another thought occurs to me about the relation between these strategies and other culturally-favored activities. It has been noted that psychoanalysis has never made the gains in Japan that it has here, despite much evidence elsewhere of Japanese eagerness to adopt Western practices. In part, the reason is simple: there is a deep repugnance in many Eastern societies to talk with non-intimates about the darker secrets of one's life: to do so is to lose face. But this was true of Western society until the present century, and if it has

changed significantly, the reason may be attributed to the acceptance of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic ideas about appropriate presentation of self. So the Japanese might have adapted as well, if the model had been perceived as worth their while, worth undergoing pain for. But Japanese culture differs from ours in being hearer-based. One can argue that Westerners were willing to undergo the pain and privation, and possible humiliation, of the process, because in a speaker-based culture, analysis is one of the few possible interactional hearer-based experiences. For one immersed in a speaker-based culture, the possibility of having someone willing to make a great effort to really understand all that one has to say, however confused it is, is immensely gratifying. We all do this, of course, for those who are powerful, whose utterances we have to interpret if we are not to be destroyed. But few of us are powerful enough to enjoy this as a regular experience -- and even for those who are, it is recognized that the work is done through fear, not love, making it probably less desirable an experience.

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