Language and linguistics

LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

72-279   Todd, William. Basic sentences. *Foundations of language* (Dordrecht), **8**, 1 (1972), 97–112.

Sentences are 'basic' when they are obligatory in every language. Three functions essential to basic sentences are considered and their corresponding types of basic sentence. The first type is basic from the point of view of language acquisition: non-basic sentences must assume a smaller number of basic sentences which are learned first. Another kind of basic sentence, which is termed presuppositionless, includes sentences like 'It is raining' and 'There is gold here'. These sentences do not seem to have genuine subject terms, and it is sentences of this kind that are among the first to be learned. A third class consists of grammatically simple sentences. [Examples.]

In the discussion that follows the term basic is confined to sentences which satisfy the first two criteria: it cannot yet be established whether such sentences must also be grammatically simple to be considered basic. The investigation of basic sentences centres upon the types of verb and subject they may have. It is not at present possible to list verbs which express 'elementary predication', that is, which are irreducible to other constructions. Consideration of the subjects of basic sentences raises crucial philosphical questions. [Discussion of presuppositionless subjects and problems of re-identification follows.] Basic sentences can be construed grammatically with either a locale or an object as subject without contravening the claim that they make no presuppositions.   **AD**

72–280 St. Clair, Robert N. Categorial rules in VSO languages. *Kivung* (Boroko), **4**, 3 (1971), 141–6.

Greenberg (1963) has shown that the surface structures of languages tend to fall into three dominant patterns. The subject (S) precedes the object (O) and the verb is the variable in that it may appear in final position (SOV), in medial position (SVO) or in initial position (VSO).

Deep structure analyses of an SVO-language such as English or an SOV-language such as Japanese have assumed that the underlying pattern is identical, as is evident from the phrase structure rules which have been devised for these languages. [Examples.] In neither case does this deep structure analysis offer any immediate challenge to the claim that a Verb Phrase (VP) is part of the fixed vocabulary of linguistic universals.

A VSO-language, however, such as Hawaiian, does not show a comparable pattern in its deep structure. The contiguity of Verb and Noun Phrase which is necessary to establish the alleged universally present Verb Phrase does not in fact occur. [Examples.] A new system of defining grammatical relationships which eliminates the Verb Phrase constituent is possible, and separate phrase structure rules for each of the major language types are given.

When more evidence is available it may become apparent that all languages conform to the VSO-pattern in their deep structure. The elimination of the Verb Phrase constituent would result in a universally valid rule for assigning grammatical function with three different sets of phrase-structural rules for establishing word order. [Bibliography.]   **ADN**

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

72–281 Palfrey, C. F. Piaget's questions to young children: an analysis of their structure and content. *Educational Review* (Birmingham), **24**, 2 (1972), 122–31.

Using questions designed to stimulate the child to produce answers, Piaget drew certain conclusions [listed] about the child's developing

conception of the world. To discover whether this could indeed be inferred from the answers given to such questions, fifty children between three and eleven years old were asked questions similar to those recorded by Piaget in his *Child's Conception of the World*. Though aware that, to some extent, the kinds of answers given were conditioned by the limitations of the language used, Piaget paid little attention to the form of his own questions. In fact vague, ambiguous, or loaded questions are likely to elicit cognate responses. [The test questions are cited and discussed individually.]

The children's responses, though not necessarily invalidating Piaget's hypotheses about the child's conception of the world, do cast doubt on the interview as an efficient method of clarifying our know-ledge of the child's perception. Since children's answers depend on the structure of the questions, it is not justifiable to judge the child's conception of the world as naive or uninformed, animistic or ego-centric; nor can we certainly state that children are unable to dis-tinguish words from the ideas or objects they represent. The type of question that seeks a particular kind of response, but that can be understood to have a number of possible meanings, yields no reliable information about the child's conception of the world, and may mis-lead the observer into evaluating responses in gradations of sophisti-cation according to age.   AGR

72-282 Goldblum, Marie-Claire. Etude expérimentale de l'acqui-sition de la syntaxe chez des enfants de 5 à 10 ans. [Experi-mental study of the acquisition of syntax in children from five to ten.] *Langue Française* (Paris), **13** (1972), 115–22.

There have been two main approaches to the description of the child's acquisition of language. The first is to carry out a structural analysis of a corpus of child language. The conclusions to be drawn from such work are limited by the number of children studied. It is not easy by this method to study the comprehension of sentences and its relationship to the production of utterances. Further, the study of the spontaneous language of adults and of children above the age of five reveals no significant grammatical differences. The second

approach is to define degrees of complexity in the adult's grammar and, by analysing the child's responses to appropriate items, to test the hypotheses established in this way.

The present paper is concerned with a study by C. Chomsky, *The acquisition of syntax in children from 5 to 10* (MIT Press 1969), which used the second of the two approaches. The hypothesis for this work was that simple syntactic constructions will be learned more quickly than complex syntactic constructions. [The remainder of the paper contains a close account of methods and conclusions of the study by C. Chomsky, with example sentences given in French. Short bibliography.] **(440) AGR AKN**

PHONEMICS

72–283 Devine, A. M. Phoneme or cluster: a critical survey. *Phonetica* (Basle), **24**, 2 (1971), 65–85.

Phonetic segmentation is based on universals of phonemic analysis. A mentalist view of the phoneme has rightly returned to favour. Physically similar sounds may be differently segmented phonemically in different languages. [The author proceeds to an examination, in the light of comment made by other linguists, of Trubetskoy's six rules concerning phonetic prerequisites and phonemic assessment. He concludes that the phonetic prerequisites are not irrelevant although they cannot be taken as exclusive tests of suitability for morphophonemic assessment.] A decision for or against a morphophonemic solution cannot be based on commutation alone. Failure of commutation with zero, which is the major test, may be either coincidental or structurally relevant. It is necessary also to use other criteria to solve problems of segmentation. There is no simple way of deciding the phoneme or cluster question; each case must be examined from the various angles suggested by the rules. **AJM**