No such things as nouns

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Is grammar real or it it just a concept?

The following is the opening sentence of the abstract of an article in the *Journal of Linguistics*, of November 2005: 'This article argues that of English adjective–noun constructions involving associative adjectives ('associative AdjNs'), some originate in the lexicon and others in the syntax.'

There has been for many years a divide in what is meant by grammar. For the general public (and in most of the *ET* articles that deal with it), grammar is understood to refer to a set of abstract terms for defining the forms of words and how they are related in sentences. For some people, however, particularly some linguistics professionals in universities, it is something real to be discovered, and grammatical terms are the means of explaining it. The quotation above is an example of the latter use. If you were unfamiliar with this approach, you might initially take the word *lexicon* here to mean (as the entries in dictionaries indicate) a list of the words in a language, but then might wonder how a *phrase* can be said, as here, to 'originate' in the lexicon (and whether you can really use the phrase 'the syntax' like that).

You would have to learn that the author in question did not mean *lexicon* in its usual dictionary sense, but as something independent of our decisions, perhaps even inside us, consisting of both the elements of words and ways of organizing them so as to produce (eventually) the actual words we say and write. So, in the one case, *lexicon* means something created from perceptible words and, in the other, something already existent but not immediately perceptible.

I should like here to try to pin down what is real and what is unreal in language, with the intention of suggesting that the use of terms such as *lexicon*, *syntax*, and even *noun* (as if referring to a linguistic reality independent of human invention) is not justified.

Some long-time readers of *ET* might at this point recollect a series of articles (1997–99) and wonder whether I am just going to repeat myself. Those articles concerned arguments for and against the existence of genetically governed universals in language. Here, I intend to limit myself to considering what people might or might not be referring to when they use grammatical or semantic terminology to talk about sentences.

Grammatical descriptions

If we exclude matters that look linguistic but seem to by-pass human beings (as with machine translation), there seem to me to be two types of things in language that are indubitably real. One is the sounds and shapes of the words we hear and read (if I may be allowed some latitude with the word 'word'). The other is biological events, of which (let us assume with physiologists) those events to do with deciding what we are going to say or write and deciding the meaning of what we have read or heard happen in the brain.

I acknowledge that I am skating over the ideas of linguistic intention and understanding here, but I hope it will not harm the argument too much. I do not know whether those brain

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events I refer to could be identified separately from others going on at the same time in the brain, but what does seem almost certain is that we could not, from observing brain events alone, say what sentence some random person intended to say or had just understood. Of the two types of real things, then, the former is immediately open to the senses and the latter usually not, but could be, with the aid of scientific instruments.

Now I should like to deal with formal descriptions of these two realities of language, taking words first. As a preparation for this, the following philosophical diversion may be helpful. If you come across a philosopher who tells you there are no such things as tables or chairs, you should not take that as a denial of the real world, but as a philosophically nit-picking way of saying that, whereas the objects we call tables and chairs certainly exist, the words *table* and *chair* are only language labels, as it were, that do not stand for anything real. We can say, then, that words stand for ideas and that we can use some words, like *table* and *chair*, to refer sometimes to real things.

Having got that out of the way, let us consider grammar. Any grammatical description of a sentence must depend on what you decide the sentence means. This principle is easily illustrated by ambiguous sentences. One of my favourites is the wartime newspaper headline '8th Army push bottles up Germans'. So, if we take the printed sentence 'The bear went over the mountain', we can (after deciding what we think it means) attach grammatical terms to it and explain how they are related. So here we can say that a noun is the subject of an intransitive verb which is modified by a prepositional phrase. The use of the word *noun* here is dependent on an idea we have about the way the word *bear* contributes to the meaning of the sentence, but it stands only for an idea about the word *bear* and not for the word itself. If an analogy would be helpful, we could say that the relationship between words and nouns is like that between cricket balls and spheres. I can hold a cricket ball in my hand, but I cannot really hold a sphere, since there is no such thing as a sphere: it is a concept.

Likewise, I can write a word, but I cannot write a noun. When it comes to describing spoken and written words, therefore, there are no such things as nouns. An expanded version of the argument might go as follows: the word *word* stands for an idea I have about the real shapes that appear as the written or printed form *bear*; the word *noun* stands for an idea I have about the shapes that constitute *bear* as a word; so *word* here stands for an idea and refers to something real, while *noun* stands for an idea and refers to an idea: that is, to something unreal. Grammatical descriptions as a whole, therefore, of the sort I have offered above, do not refer to anything real.

Semantic descriptions

Let us now consider formal descriptions of meanings. These should be distinguished from explanations of meanings, where in many cases we ought to find a sufficient one provided by the sentence itself: we should be surprised, for example, if a native English-speaker asked what *The bear went over the mountain* meant. When we talk about linguistic meaning, we can be referring either to what we mean by the words we produce or to what we understand from those we encounter. In both cases it can be hard to separate sentences from meanings, and it may be that we should not, but here I shall refer to meaning only as understanding, rather than as intention.

For semantic descriptions to have any sense or use, it needs to be possible at the least for some pairs of identical sentences to have the same semantic description. The reality here is brain events, but since no two people's lives have been the same and the experiences of individuals are constantly being modified, it seems impossible that there could be any analysable match between sentences and the brain events consequent on reading or hearing them. It seems, then, that the only basis for describing meanings is what people say they have understood, rather than their understanding in its own right.

We can show or explain our understanding of a sentence in various ways: we might translate it or paraphrase it or talk about its concepts and how they are related. Your immediate understanding of a sentence is a particular, private experience; it is, so to speak, a feeling, or a reaction, prompted by your perceiving it. In most cases you would not say you had really been aware of the reaction; it is not normally something you think about. Perhaps the reality is that we have a brief series of connected reactions that clarifies the sense. Occasionally, of course, we re-evaluate our initial reactions quite consciously, maybe over months. Any

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discussion of the meaning of a sentence in terms of concepts, therefore, is bound to be a partial version of that experience or, to put it more accurately, of what you thought that experience was.

With 'The bear went over the mountain' the semantic description is likely to omit that part of your understanding of the sentence related to your knowledge of campfire songs or, perish the thought, your memories of them. Formal descriptions of meanings, therefore, can be done only with terms broad enough for there to be general agreement about their significance and use. So, for our *bear* sentence, we could say its meaning contained the concepts of sentient being, autonomous movement, direction, geographical feature, and past time, related to each other in a particular way.

Here, the terms *sentient being* and *past time* do not refer to any real sentient being or any real past time (whatever that might be), but just to the ideas of them. There could be descriptions with terms it would be even harder to connect with real things, such as 'logical dependency'. Semantic descriptions of sentences, then, do not refer to anything real.

Relating grammatical to semantic descriptions

In talking about the formal descriptions of meanings, I have deliberately said nothing about the relationship between brain events and the experience of understanding sentences. This is all tied up with the knotty problem of consciousness, or awareness, that is currently taxing the minds of philosophers and neuroscientists. Whatever may turn out to be the correct view of consciousness, if ever one is arrived at, I cannot at present see how it could alter the right arguments about the ways in which we should regard or describe language. I shall therefore take the coward's way out and duck the issue.

As for the relationship between grammatical and semantic structures, it should be clear, if what I have said about them individually is correct, that there can be no scientific way of linking the two, since neither refers to anything real. It is not difficult either to conclude that there can be no analytical match between them, as we know quite well that one type of grammatical structure, at least of the sort I have given above, may relate to different semantic types and vice-versa.

When it comes to using semantic structures, it is hard to think of any use for the one I did for the *bear* sentence, or any like it. It can be amusing to make them up, but they are unlikely to illuminate anything. It is more likely that we would take a broad semantic structure – unfulfilled past conditions, let us say – and then, with examples such as *If you'd been there, you'd have laughed your socks off*, we could talk about the grammar of English *if*-clauses. This generalized semantic structure can then be carried over to other languages to see what happens there. Even then, we should be likely to restrict ourselves to only a few types of similar grammatical structures, since there would be no point in comparing the above with *Your absence deprived you of an occasion for immoderate hilarity*, even though the two could be given the same semantic description.

Another possibility is to take a grammatical feature, such as the perfect tense in English, and see what types of semantic features it can relate to, then perhaps carry that over to other languages as well. There is nothing especially systematic about this: it just provides a useful shorthand that avoids particular descriptions for each example. We might, then, use general semantic terms such as *perfective aspect* and *nonperfective aspect* in explaining that the sentence *Bill has often been visited by John* implies that John must be alive relative to the present time of the sentence, unless the later visits were ghostly ones.

Such terms, once their significance is generally understood and agreed on, allow us to say, for example, without having to go into details of the meaning, that the Simple Past tense in *I brought you a cup of tea* might have a perfective aspect in American English, but would be unlikely to in British English.

Relating sentences to meanings

What I have said in the previous section indicates what I think are the likely limitations for relating grammatical descriptions to semantic ones. What, though, of the relationship between sentences and meanings themselves? Many people would say that sentences contain their meanings. If we are talking here of sentences as the things we hear and read, there is clearly nothing there except what the sentence physically consists of, such as a succession of sound-waves or ink marks on paper. If it is

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claimed, however, that a sentence is something other than what we perceive, or includes it or is additional to it, then it must be asked how the meaning separates itself to become part of our experience.

The answer is difficult to see. The idea that meanings come from sentences seems to me like saying that, when you stub your toe on the kitchen table-leg, the pain is transferred from the piece of furniture into your body.

Another way of looking at it is to say that sentences do not contain their meanings at all, but only express them. That is to say, our perception of a physical sentence provokes an experience, and this event can be thought of as the sentence's expressing its meaning. That strikes me as preferable to saying that meanings are in sentences. There could be an even simpler idea, though, that seems to work for sentences you would say you had certainly understood. Let us imagine then that, in replying to someone who said 'He's late', you took a risk and insincerely asked 'What does "He's late" mean?' If you were lucky, you might get only a tetchy reply along the lines of 'Well, it means he's late. What do you mean "What does it mean?"?' In other words, we could say, not that the sentence contains its meaning or even expresses it but that it *is* its meaning.

Perhaps I could enlarge on that idea with the following anecdote. When I was a student, one of my Latin lecturers said (annoyingly and lazily I thought at the time) that while there were many things he could tell us about the ode of Horace he was lecturing on that might help us understand it better, the only way he could tell us its meaning would be for him to read it to us again. Some years later, I understood what he meant: that the precise meaning of the poem cannot be derived other than from the poem itself; that is, the poem is indivisible from its meaning.

The poem, however, is not a part of language unless it is perceived with some comprehension, and for that to happen there must be people. For each reading, therefore, there will be the poem and at least one person and thus the poem will mean something different each time, and for each person, since people are different and individuals change. The same goes for all language. The meaning of a sentence is the sentence itself when someone understands something from it. With many sentences, of course, particularly ones to do with facts or logic, we should hope there was enough in common among people's understanding, particularly when this shared part needed to be important in a practical way – that, for example, the sentence 'Fasten your seatbelts' in an aeroplane would not produce widely different interpretations from the passengers.

Unreal and real grammar

At the beginning, I said there were people, especially some employed in university departments of linguistics, who view grammar as something real, and it may seem to you that in the interim I've forgotten about them. At the risk of misrepresenting their views, I should like in these last sections to discuss what such a claim could mean and what could prompt it, in order to show why I think the arguments I have just given were worth making.

For the sorts of grammatical analyses I have referred to it should be clear that the terms are abstract and not difficult to use. So, taking a random sentence such as *John is easy to please*, even the rawest beginner will tell you there is a noun (*John*), which is the subject of a verb (*is*) and the object of an infinitive phrase (*to please*), and that we can come to that conclusion because we have decided on a meaning for that sentence. Our beginner might also add that the same grammatical description might not be yielded if the sentence were translated straightforwardly into some other language – one that did not have infinitives, for example.

Those who claim reality for grammar, however, will say that things are not so simple and that the truth is to be found in a form of language that, though real, is not perceptible. Its description is difficult to formulate, but will eventually link up with the words we read or hear, or at least an idealized form of them. As for meanings, no semantic analyses, either of the sorts I have offered here or any other, could possibly refer to physical reality in any comprehensible way.

What then prompts the idea of the reality of grammar? It depends, I think, on the answer you give to the question: Why have all the things in language been as they have been? The simple answer, and the correct one in my view, is: because that is what people have done. The 'grammar realists', if I may call them that, think there must be something else behind it all and that, if some system could be presented, in words or symbols (that took into account every possible sentence in reasonable

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detail), then that would suggest something other than simply human actions causing language to be as it is. The grammar realists think for the most part that the cause is genetic. We should note that this view does not propose merely that language exists because of our genes – no one should want to argue against that – but that it is part of them, which is a different kettle of fish entirely. The implication of that, then, is that there really are such things as nouns and they are in our genes.

What is there, then, in perceptible language that prompted some people to set themselves the task of describing a more general unperceived form? The two principal causes that have been offered are regularities in the development of young children's speech and structural similarities within and across languages. Pointing to such things, the grammar realists suggested there were genetic grammatical features outside our control that are universal to all known and all possible natural human languages. As mentioned earlier, this argument has been slugged out already in the pages of *ET* and so I shall not pursue it here in detail. All I should like to repeat now is that I think these two aspects of language are entirely to do with people as social beings and are not restricted by biology.

Grammar out in the open

While we can agree with Wittgenstein that ordinary language disguises the form of the thought, this does not mean that, for the purposes of grammatical description, you can interpret a sentence as different from its appearance. If you do so, you run the risk of making the interpretation, rather than the sentence itself, the object of the analysis: that is to say (putting it more bluntly), of fixing the evidence to suit the theory. Here, it seems to me, lies the principal error of the grammar realists, who claim that the reality – the biological one perhaps – behind the grammatical system they wish to present is the origin of the apparent regularities in sentences as sounds and shapes.

The grammar unrealists, if such a term is possible, would say, by contrast, that there is no linguistic reality other than words out in the open that we hear and read and that those words are the only proper object of grammatical description.

This difference of approach reflects a conflict of views, therefore, about language in general: whether it is a socially developed creation with changeable conventions or a biological system with wordless elements, some of whose permutations have been realized as perceptible sentences. In the latter view, languages in the world are taken as coming from a general pattern, in which there are real grammatical forms. This idea, of course, is what prompted the theory of a universal grammar and the search for linguistic universals to validate it, and is what leads some people (as I mentioned at the beginning of this article) to use terms such as *lexicon*, *syntax*, and *noun* as if they referred to parts of a reality independent of human decisions.

The aim of those who think in that way is to explain language or, as it is often put, to 'account for' it, by a set of principles. One recent version, while maintaining a biolinguistic basis, proposes that genetic endowment alone is not a sufficient explanation, but that experience and other principles not specific to language are needed as well. If that means, at least in part, that the ways in which we say things are influenced by our experiences, I would not disagree, but the general idea of accounting for language by objective principles still seems as pointless to me as trying to account for human history in that way.

Let me finish by grasping the cricket ball again. Because I am a human I can, unlike snails and badgers, project this ball into the air. Some cricketers can do so with great precision and others can hit it with a bat. No one in their right mind, though, would study lots of games of cricket to find universal features in them that would support a theory that accounted for the game in general. When a batsman is *out*, that is not dependent on an underlying reality of *outness*. Language, like cricket, is not a thing in itself and we should use the word *language* just to refer a type of activity.

This analogy between language and cricket is far from exact, I admit, but I hope it serves to show the limitations I think there must be in treating language as a biological phenomenon and the misjudgement of those who view their purpose in studying language as that of finding a reality in it that can be described with grammatical terms. So, if I want to tell someone that the bear went over the mountain, what will happen? Will my genes start the sentence with a noun, or will I start it with a word? ■

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