THE SYNTAX OF REFERENCE AND PREDICATION

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Speech acts are acts of communication that people
perform by uttering sentences under conditions speci-
fied by the speech-act rules. If speech act theory
is correct, the basic speech acts are illocution, refer-
ence and predication; and the sentences used in these
acts must have syntactic or phonological potentials for
being so used. (Alston, 1963 Searle, 1969) In uttering
a sentence like (1) or (2), for example, a speaker
characteristically performs all three basic speech acts,
because the syntax and the phonology of the sentence
permit him to do so

      (1) Nixon resigned.
      (2) Did Nixon resign?

In uttering both (1) and (2), the speaker refers to a
certain referent (Nixon) and predicates of him a certain
property (having resigned). In uttering (1), however,
he performs the illocutionary act of stating that the
referent has that property while, in uttering (2), he per-
forms the different illocutionary act of asking whether
it has it. The illocutionary potentials of (1) and (2)
reside in both their syntax--the declarative (subject +
verb) syntax of (1), the interrogative (do + subject +
verb) syntax of (2)--and their phonology (the different
intonation contours). The referring and the predicating
potentials reside only in the syntax however· Nixon is
a referring phrase (that is, has a potential for use in
referring to Nixon); and resigned in (1) and did resign
in (2) are predicating phrases (have a potential for use
in predicating the property of having resigned). A refer-
ring phrase is any phrase that has a potential for use
in referring--that, under the intentional and contextual
conditions specified by the speech-act rules of reference,
a speaker may use to refer to (to pick out and identify)
a referent. A predicating phrase is any phrase that has
a potential for use in predicating a property of a refer-
ent or a relation of two or more referents.

In this paper, we focus upon reference and predica-
tion--assuming, not arguing, that speech-act theory is
correct about them and about the sentences used in their
performance, and assuming also that referring and pre-
dicating potentials reside in the syntax of these
sentences (that is, that the referring phrase and the
predicating phrase are syntactic categories). For a
given language, then, the question is which phrases are
referring phrases and which predicating This question,
we do not, however, attempt to answer, that is, we do
not attempt to formulate, for English or any other langu-
age, the syntactic rules that generate all and only
referring phrases and predicating phrases, i e., rules
of a form like

        Referring Phrase ⟶
        Predicating Phrase ⟶

We attempt, rather, to answer another question whether
these two categories coincide, in surface structure or deep, with
the traditional categories--or categories-and-functions--
of syntax We argue that, surprisingly, they do not,
at least for English And we venture to suggest that
perhaps this poor fit casts doubt upon the validity of
the traditional categories and functions.

Our task, then, is the critical one of raising
questions that, so far as we are aware, have never been
raised, of rejecting some tempting answers to them, and,
in the light of this, of questioning the validity of
much traditional (and, for that matter, untraditional)
syntax

Perhaps the most tempting answer to the question of
which phrases are referring and which predicating is to
identify referring phrases with noun phrases and predi-
cating phrases with verb phrases (or with the predicate-
phrases in Chomsky's Aspects) We show that this answer
won't do Our most inclusive generalizations are

        (a) that not all noun phrases are referring
            phrases,
        (b) that not all referring phrases are noun
            phrases,
        (c) that not all verb phrases are predica-
            ting phrases,
        (d) that not all predicating phrases are
            verb phrases

Let's look at some details.

First, the distinction between referring phrases
and predicating phrases is not the distinction, in
either surface structure or deep, between subjects
and predicates (that is, between noun phrases fuctioning
as subjects and verb phrases functioning as predicates).
The subject of a sentence may be a referring phrase,
and the predicate a predicating phrase as in (1) and (2),
but they need not.

For one thing, the subject of an existential sentence--
a sentence that, used in making a statement, affirms or
denies the existence of something--is not a referring
phrase·

        (3)   Unicorns exist
        (4)   Unicorns do not exist.

If it were, (3) as a statement would be a tautology--
it would assume or presuppose, according to the speech-
act rules for referring, the very thing it states
(namely, that the noun phrase unicorns has a referent,
that there are unicorns, that unicorns exist.) And (4)
as a statement would be' implicitly contradictory--it
would assume or presuppose that unicorns exist (that the
noun phrase unicorns has a referent) but then proceed
to state exactly the opposite.

Nor is the predicate of an existential sentence a
predicating phrase. The predicates of (3) and (4)--exist
and do not exist--are only parts of predicating phrases.
In both (3) and (4), the entire sentence is a predicating
phrase; there are no referring phrases at all. (This,
incidentally, is evidence that predication is more basic
than reference; reference is sometimes dispensable. Much
referring--at least that referring which does not depend
upon deixis or mutual knowledge--is possible only because
of previous predication. Once (3) is uttered, or assumed
to be utterable, as a true statement, then the noun phrase
unicorns in (5)--

        (5)   Unicorns like fudge.

--becomes a referring phrase.)

For another thing, an abstract subject as in (6)--

(6)   Fatheadedness characterizes Bill

--is not a referring phrase, nor is the predicate of such
a sentence a predicating phrase   The subject is part
of the predicating phrase (fatheadedness characterizes)
If the deep structure of (6) is something like (7), and
that it is, is debatable--

(7)   Bill is fatheaded.

--then the deep-structure subject of (6) is a referring
phrase (Bill), and the deep-structure predicate is a
predicating phrase (is fatheaded).   In any case, (6) and
(7) are surely synonymous, and the referring and predi-
cating potentials must be identical.

Finally, in a sentence consisting of two definite
noun phrases and a transitive verb--

(8)   Mary hit Bill

--the subject (Mary) is a referring phrase, the predi-
cate, however, is not simply a predicating phrase, but
a predicating phrase (hit) followed by a referring phrase
(Bill)   Used in making a statement, (8)   refers to two
referents (Mary and Bill) and predicates a certain rela-
tion of them (the hitter-hit relation)

Second, the distinction between referring phrases
and predicating phrases is not the distinction between
topic and comment, theme and rheme or other components of
sentential "Information Structure "

(9)   Salami, I like

--the topic (salami) is indeed a referring phrase, how-
ever, the comment (I like) is not simply a predicating
phrase, but a referring phrase (I) followed by a pre-
dicating phrase (like)   Used in making a statement, (9)
refers to two referents (the speaker and salami) and
predicates a certain relation of them (the liker-liked
relation)

Third, as a general rule, though definite noun
phrases are referring, indefinite noun phrases are
not. In (10) and (11), for instance--

<div style="text-align:center">

(10)   Bill is the fathead.
(11)   Mary hit the fathead.
</div>

--the definite noun phrase the fathead is referring.   In
both cases the verb is a predicating phrase with a poten-
tial for predicating a relation between the referent of
the subject and that of the fathead· in (10), the
identity relation, in (11) the hitter/hit relation   In
(12) and (13), however--

<div style="text-align:center">

(12)   Bill is a fathead.
(13)   Mary hit a fathead.
</div>

--the indefinite noun phrase a fathead is not referring.
In   (12), which is synonymous with (6) and (7), the noun
phrase a fathead is part of the predicating phrase is a
fathead.   Compare the Black Vernacular English version
given in (14).

<div style="text-align:center">

(14)   Bill a fathead.
</div>

Here, in the surface structure at least, a fathead alone
is the predicating phrase. As for (13), the indefinite
noun phrase cannot be a referring phrase; in authentic
language use, it would not select out and uniquely iden-
tify any particular fathead which Mary hit.   Rather,
it seems to be an existential predication   Like (3) and
(4), the entire sentence is a predicating phrase; however,
this predicating phrase has what we might call a subordin-
ate referring phrase embedded within it.   Thus (13) is
synonymous with (15).

<div style="text-align:center">

(15)   A fathead such that Mary hit him exists.
</div>

Perhaps an exception to the general rule that indefinite
noun phrases are not referring is any indefinite subject
interpreted as universally or generically quantified, an
elephant in (16), for example.

> (16)   An elephant (i e. every elephant,
>   all elephants) can be hypnotized

Further, since some referring phrases are locative ad-
verbs, as in (17)--

> (17)   Bill is here

--not all referring phrases are noun phrases   In (17)
is is a predicating phrase with a potential for use in
predicating a relation (the being-at relation) of the
referent of Bill and the referent of the locative ad-
verb here

     We promised to venture to suggest that the poor
fit between the syntactic/semantic categories "referring
phrase" and "predicating phrase," and traditional syn-
tactic categories or categories-and-functions casts
doubt upon the validity of the latter   Three points

     First, it is a curious fact that the main features
of traditional syntactic analysis--the binary immediate-
constituent analysis of the sentence into subject and
predicate or into noun phrase and verb phrase (or predi-
cate-phrase), for example--have survived intact from
Plato in the Greco-Roman tradition and Panini in the
Indian, through structural linguistics to generative-
transformational linguistics   From this fact, we might
argue that the traditional analysis is correct   Other-
wise it would not have withstood nearly 2500 years of
change in linguistic fashions. In particular, it would
not have withstood the last 50, certainly not the last
20   But we might also argue that only the dead hand of
tradition has kept it alive--that no one has really
questioned it (subjected it to empirical confirmation,
say) and that in the light of speech-act theory, it is
high time that someone question it.

     Second, if speech-act theory is correct about illo-
cution, reference and predication being the basic speech
acts and about the potentials that sentences used in the
performance of these acts must have, and if the tradi-
tional syntactic analysis is also right, then every
language--English, at least--has a dual syntactic struc-
ture.   One part of this dual structure--let's call it

the speech act structure--has as its basic syntactic
categories the referring phrase and the predicating
phrase (together with declarative, interrogative,
imperative and other forms marking illocutionary poten-
tial)   The other part--traditional structure--has as
its basic categories the noun phrase and the verb or
predicate phrase.   The speech act structure is closely
related to the semantic or meaning structure of the
sentence; the traditional structure--even in deep struc-
ture--is less closely related. This (admittedly rather
implausible) dual syntactic structure would seem to be
evidence that the principle of least effort--maximum
semantic ends with minimum syntactic and phonetic means--
does not operate in language.

    Third, if speech-act theory is right and the tradi-
tional syntactic analysis wrong, then the grammar of a
language can, it would seem, be vastly simplified. It
can postulate fewer entities and fewer rules (thereby
pleasuring Occam's Razor)   In particular, it can elimin-
ate, at least in deep structure, the basic categories
of traditional syntactic analysis, and some of the rules
relating semantic structure (very close to speech-act
structure) to traditional syntactic structure.   The
duty of a grammar--or of any other theory--is to explain
the phenomena by (among other things) postulating as few
entities as possible.   In linguistics, however, it is
not always easy to say just what the phenomena are.   Are
speaker's intuitions about syntactic surface structures
among the phenomena?   If so, what are they?   Is there
evidence, for instance, that (18) (or any of the many
variants of it) represents their intuitions about the
structure of (11) better than (19) which is surely
closer to their intuitions about its semantic structure?
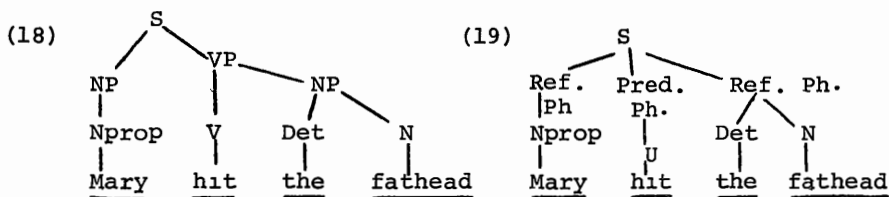
There is some evidence (e g Bach 1968, Fillmore,
1971, McCawley, 1971, Steinmann, 1974) that (19) or
something like it, is closer to the semantic structure
of (11)   Is there any evidence that (18) is the syn-
tactic structure of it?

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