Work Papers of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, University of North Dakota Session

Volume 3 Article 10

1959

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Recommended Citation
Pittman, R. S. (1959) "Some thoughts on tagmemics," *Work Papers of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, University of North Dakota Session*: Vol. 3 , Article 10.
DOI: 10.31356/silwp.vol03.10
Available at: https://commons.und.edu/sil-work-papers/vol3/iss1/10

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SOME THOUGHTS ON TAGMEMICS

R. S. Pittman

1. The spot-class correlation is not a minimal unit comparable to phoneme and morpheme as minimal units. In the sentence 'The boy read the book', for example, there is said to be a tagmeme of 'noun-in-subject-slot' and another of 'noun-in-object-slot.' The article 'the' presumably represents another tagmeme something like 'article-in-modifier-slot.' But the words 'boy' and 'book' (and other words in the same class) are readily isolatable from both of these 'slots.' It is not desirable to analyze the article 'the', on the other hand, as a representative of another tagmeme, when its function is to mark the class of 'boy' and 'book.'

2. Classes of marginal morphs (e.g. Fries' function words) are so different from classes of word roots (e.g. Fries' parts of speech) that it is very misleading to use a single term--tagmeme--to label each in its respective slot.

Corollary: The high validity which tagmemics gives to the word unit in its descriptions is trustworthy as long as this unit is reflecting primarily a root belonging to a class of unlimited membership. When it reflects a unit belonging to a class of limited membership, however, it is dealing with a signal which is different, not in degree, but in kind.

3. The term 'slot', besides being objectionable (to R.S.P. at least) because of its colloquial flavor, implies a model which does not readily fit a number of language features. (1) Because it implies a relevance of

physical order which in some languages, such as Latin, may be very negligible; (2) Because it seems difficult to apply in cases of suprasegmental 'slots' and non-emic position and in cases such as the relation signalled by Tagalog na in phrases such as ang bulaklak na maganda, 'the beautiful flower' which may be rearranged to read ang maganda-ng bulaklak; and (3) Because it implies a relevance of each position to each other position, which is not, in fact, the case.

Corollary: The objections of tagmemics to a "binary" immediate constituent structure of language and the substitution of a slot-class model are based on an older view of immediate constituents. The objections are largely irrelevant to the newer view.

4. Grammar, if it is anything at all, is a system of relations between lexical units, not the lexical units themselves. To give a list of lexical units, therefore, as the manifestation of a grammatical unit (Pike, 1954, p. 122a) and say that relations between lexical units lack manifestation (Pike, 1954, p. 153b) is to make lexical, not grammatical observations.

5. The term "hierarchy" does not seem to me to be either felicitous or necessary. It does not seem felicitous because language structures change so radically as they go "up the hierarchy" and analogies between higher and lower levels are apt to be very misleading. Thus, a suffix-stem construction is not necessarily analogous to an adjective-noun, a subject-predicate, nor a dependent-independent clause construction. As for the expressions "phonological hierarchy", "lexical hierarchy", "grammatical hierarchy", these are already better expressed by the terms "phonology", "lexicon" and "grammar."

6. Tagmemic formulas and terminology, especially when combined with the practice of numbering morphemes, are singularly forbidding to our reading constituency (other linguists, missionaries, anthropologists, government officials) and lose the very audience that we need most to keep.