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Richard S. Pittman
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On Eliciting Transformations in Vietnamese

Richard Pittman

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"I don't care how you get them," Chomsky is alleged to have said. No doubt he added, under his breath, "But I do care that you get them."

Just in case there is one who does care how, this is a note on my try at the job in the spring of 1965. As one of the first (1954) to apply some of the principles of Chomsky's "ordered rules" approach to language description, I may perhaps be pardoned for dreaming that there might be an ordered rules approach to language elicitation.

My informant at the time I made this attempt was Mr. Nguyen Van Thuong, of Central Viet Nam. I already knew

enough Vietnamese to be able to carry on all discussions of what we were doing in that language, but I did not know in advance the conclusions described on the following pages. Assumptions, deductions and clues I certainly had and fed into the elicitation process. But the conclusions came out by induction.

I. Methods

1. Battery-of-sentences model. Impressed by what Thomas (1964 a,b) and Banker (1964) had achieved in transformational paradigms, I tried them first. My approach was to show Thuong a set of transformations of an English kernel sentence, then remove it so he could not translate, at the same time asking him to build a paradigm of his own from a Vietnamese core.

An early set I showed him went like this:

I got sick
 I got sick with malaria
 Malaria made me sick
 Malaria is what made me sick
 Did you get sick?
 Did you get sick with malaria?
 What made you sick?
 What were you sick with?
 Did malaria make you sick?

2. Explanation of actor-action-goal constants. In eliciting batteries of sentences I did not always give an English battery as an example. After Thuong caught on to the battery pattern, which did not take long, all I had to do was give a sample kernel sentence and ask him to give me a similar sentence (not a translation) in Vietnamese, then give all variations which he could think of. The result was a battery.

There was one important condition, however. I had to make plain that the actor-action-goal referents must be held constant.

Thus	The dog bit the fox
	The fox was bitten by the dog
	The bite which the dog gave the fox
	The bite which the fox got from the dog

All of these were acceptable, but "The fox bit the dog" was not acceptable because the referents had changed. To be sure even a change of referents could be accepted provided it was covered by appropriate rules. I did not feel able to control the variables, however, at this stage of informant work, unless I kept the referents constant. Note that in doing this a person is holding each open class referent constant.

Note that this rule admits "The rat was seen by the cat" as a transformation of "The cat saw the rat" but rejects "The cat was seen by the rat."

Other typical paradigm-generating examples:

The man made the box for the boy
 This tree is taller than that one
 The friend went away

3. Elicitation of questions from statements. Although I mixed questions with statements indiscriminately in my first examples, most of the paradigms which I got in return were sets of statements. Since it proved very natural to ask for a question that would correspond to each statement, I asked Thuong to give me such, which he readily did in most cases. Occasionally there was a statement which did not seem to suggest a readily corresponding question.

It soon became quite natural to record the battery of statements down the right side of the page, leaving the left side blank for the corresponding questions.

On one occasion I had asked Thuong to give me some examples of sentences using a pair of words meaning "whenever... then..." The result was the following:

Whenever it rains, then everyone
 is happy.
 Whenever that cloud passes, then
 the weather will clear again.
 Whenever I get money, then I will
 buy a car.
 Whenever much is sown, then much
 is harvested.

Some time later I asked him to give me questions which correspond to those statements. The results are listed below to show the sequence in which they were recorded, but in my original notes each question was written directly to the left of its answer.

If it rains, we are
 happy, aren't we?
 When will the weather
 clear again?
 If you get money, what
 will you do?
 What do you do in order
 to be able to harvest much?

4. Sentences from function words. One of the most rewarding procedures was to scrutinize text for perplexing function words then ask Thuong to give additional examples of a given function word in sentences similar to the original illustration. One such word could be translated "no-doubt" at the end of a sentence, but something like "definitely" before a negative. I chose a sentence from Hoa's Read Vietnamese, pg. 30:

South Vietnam has boats, definitely not has pack-
elephants. When I asked Thuong for additional ex-
amples, he gave me

Vietnam has rice, definitely not has wheat.
Let us eat, definitely not drink.
Work and work, definitely do-not play.

In Smalley and Van's Vietnamese for Missionaries section 18.13, I found a pair of words which could be translated "all", and which occurred before another which could be translated "each". The sentence was

Call all each person.

To this Thuong added

In Vietnam all each place together has war.
In Vietnam all each person together fears war.
All each thing together expensive completely.
All each thing bought in market together ex-
pensive completely.

5. Transformations from text. Occasionally I got a windfall: some text would turn up with two or three simple transformations in plain sight. Thus on pages two and five of Hoa's Read Vietnamese I found the following, juxtaposed here.

The French prime minister has-just changed the cabinet.	The French cabinet chang- ed.
The French president will establish an army.	An army will be establish- ed by the French pre- sident.
Mr. Daladier organized the French cabinet.	The French cabinet was by Mr. Daladier organized.

Thuong had no problem in lining up additional illustrations of the same transformations on these models.

6. Constructions from text. In addition to choosing function words and transformations from text on which to crystallize other transformations, I often chose "problem" constructions from text and asked Thuong to give me additional examples. The problems, of course, were always due to my inadequate understanding of a pattern. The examples which Thuong gave contained not only identical structures with various options or substitutions, but also occasionally some authentic rearrangements of the same constituents.

A construction "give finish" in Smalley and Van 19.23 occurred in the following sentence:

I wash always clothing give finish no?

This precipitated the following examples from Thuong:

You must talk give finish then only can go.

I must work give finish have then only go.

We must work give finish this work today.

Any day's work must be done give finish completely that day.

Another sentence from SV 19.22 had an unfamiliar "not able" construction in it.

I lift up not able.

Thuong added:

You can move able this table no? I move not able.

You carry-one-end able this drum no? I carry-one-end not able. Bring not able well don't try.

7. Word-plus-diagram situational sentences. Some useages are so complicated that I could think of no way but word-plus-diagram to show what I meant. Equivalentents for "take" and "bring" with their prepositions are examples. No language has exact equivalentents for any other language in this area.

In the following tables capital letters represent distinct individuals, V represents a verb translatable as take, bring, carry, quotation marks indicate direct quotations, S represents a verb translatable as say, speak, to indicates direction of action, N. represents an object such as "book".

- (1) X S to Y, "X V O to Y"
- (2) X S to Y, "X V O to X"
- (3) X S to Y, "Y V O to Z"
- (4) A S to B, "X V O to Y"
- (5) X S Y, "Y V O from X to Z"
- (6) X S to Y, "X V O from Y to X"
- (7) X S to Y, "Y V O from Z to X"
- (8) A S to B, "X V O from Y to X"

The resulting Vietnamese for V... (from X) to... follows:

- (1) dua/trao O cho Y.
- (2) dua (lai)/trao giu X O cho X.
- (3) trao/dem/dua laci O cho Z.
- (4) dua/mang O cho Z.
- (5) mang O dem de dang kia.
- (6) X di lay O lai.
- (7) den lay O cua Z dem/lai/dem lai cho X.
- (8) den lay O cua Z lai.
- (9) den/di lay O dem giu X.

In the next illustration, single prime strokes have been used to indicate that two optional sequences may be included or omitted together, but not separately:

(I)' not-yet ever time (been-able-to eat mango special at-all)'.
 'special at-all)'.

10. Permutation. The following notation is simply a modification for typewriter of what is already customary in long-hand usage.

"Older-brother have be-able change/thing table this no?"

The invertible components, of course, are change and thing table this.

"By illness which/grandfather got sick?"

11. Substitution. Two or more mutually substitutable words have been written in sequence on the line, but separated by slashes. If the substitution is a phrase for a word, the phrase is underlined. If there is no underlining on one side of a slash, the one word immediately adjoining that side is the only included in the substitution.

"Do thus how so/that hear for clarity?" ("that" may be substituted for "so".)

"Grandfather got caught/sick from illness which?" ("sick from" may be substituted for "caught".)

12. Co-occurrence. Primes-plus-parentheses for co-occurrence-plus-option have already been illustrated in paragraph 9. Co-occurrence without option can also be marked by primes, but parentheses would be ambiguous. Primes-plus-underlining therefore, for more-than-one-word sequences, were elected.

"'The-more' you drink the 'thirstier' you get."

13. Capability formulas. My usage in capability formulas follows essentially that of Thomas and Banker - capital letters for open classes, representative morphs for closed. Thus N1 Aj bang N2 is a formula for the comparative which would be read "Noun 1 adjective as Noun 2".
tat ca moi N deu V "every all each Noun together Verb".

14. Transformational rules. I have written these with a combination of Thomas formulas and Chomsky arrows.

bao lau S? ⇒ T S in which S means sentence and T means time expression. Translation:
How long S? ⇒ T S.

S bao lau? ⇒ S T roi. Translation:
S how long? ⇒ S T already.
G bi V boi ai? ⇒ ⇒ G bi A V. Translation:
Goal got Verb by whom? ⇒ Goal got Actor Verb.

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