

ON THE COMPATIBILITY OF GESTALT LINGUISTICS AND STRATIFICATIONAL GRAMMAR

by William M. Christie, Jr.

This essay had its origins in a question put to me some time back by Uhlan Slagle. Referring to his own work (Slagle and Anttila Ms.: references) in Gestalt psychology, as well as to my own in stratificational grammar, he asked if I had done anything toward resolving the basic incompatibility of the two. The question has occupied me off and on since then, but the recent prominence that Gestalt linguistics has taken (for example, Anttila [1977]) as an alternative to the reductionism of the vast majority of the current approaches to linguistics has brought the problem a fresh immediacy. This collection seems a particularly appropriate place to review the question and attempt an answer, for the growing and simultaneous interest in both Gestalt linguistics and stratificational grammar would make it particularly unfortunate if a basic incompatibility held the two apart.

I

While Gestalt linguistics finds its foundation in certain principles of Gestalt psychology, it is not tied to it in all details. As Slagle (1975) has acknowledged, Gestalt psychology is defective in certain details and cannot be totally accepted in its original form. Because of the differences between the two, then, it seems best to note the relationship in passing and proceed to an independent description of the basic principles of Gestalt linguistics.

The characteristic that most clearly sets Gestalt linguistics off from other, reductionist varieties is its treatment of the object under investigation as a unity, a whole that is not merely an aggregate of ordered or unordered parts. Indeed, even the recognition of parts is not essential in a gestaltist framework. What are in other models treated as parts can in Gestalt linguistics be regarded as nothing more than qualities of the whole that are abstracted for purposes of discussion. An enumeration of these qualities does not exhaust the object under

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description, for the coherence of these qualities in a total pattern transcends the mere aggregate of them. In the gestaltist view, then, to use a hackneyed phrase, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

There is another aspect of Gestalt linguistics that also needs mention. Any object under investigation may itself be regarded as an abstraction from the totality in which it occurs. Any utterance that is a text will itself be situationally contextualized. Note here the distinction between utterance and text, the latter being a special case of the former. An utterance can be anything at all produced by the natural human communicative apparatus or its instruments, including natural speech, computer-produced "poetry," and even isolated sentences concocted by linguists to be their objects of study. A text, on the other hand, is a naturally occurring contextualized utterance. All texts are therefore utterances, but not all utterances are texts. One should note, however, that an utterance that is not a text can become one on proper contextualization and use. Chomsky's famous *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously* started life as an utterance but not as a text. Upon contextualization in a poem, however, it became a text. Now if we accept what I regard as a quite unexceptionable position, namely Firth's treatment of meaning (Firth 1935), we find that it follows from the foregoing discussion that only texts have meaning, and that their meaning depends on the context. This fact, of course, explains how Chomsky's sentence can have been considered meaningless when originally produced, but meaningful after its use in a poem. Furthermore, it must follow that Chomsky's sentence is merely a particularly obvious case, and that any sentence artificially concocted by a linguist must be regarded as meaningless unless there is associated with it some actual, implied, or at least potential context, which can give it meaning. In these terms, then, a text can be seen as an abstracted property of the total situation in which it occurs. And since the text acquires meaning as a result of contextualization, the gestaltist approach requires a field method for the description of semantics.

With the mention of Firth and the choice of the field approach for semantics, we might be tempted to make the Firthian extension of the notion of semantics and require a field approach to all of language description. Such an extension is not necessary, however, if we follow Halliday and Lamb (1973) and draw a distinction between internal and external grammar. The extension of the term "grammar" to the study of external relations is perhaps unfortunate, for it is just internal grammar, so called, that is the traditional range for grammar (without modifiers). A reference to external grammar might well lead to an unfortunate and inappropriate extension of the methods of internal grammar to external description, or vice versa. It is just such an extension that has been one of the major problems with transformational grammar as it has been practiced. This matter is treated in Robinson (1975). Now quite clearly the social structure of external grammar is the proper realm for a field description, but it does not necessarily follow that the field will be required for internal description. Some

other models may be appropriate here, provided they are compatible with the description of the external relations. I do not propose to explore this matter in detail here, as I have explicated the various relationships elsewhere (Christie 1980). But we will return to the matter later when we examine the way in which stratificational grammar can be integrated into a gestaltist framework.

II

In the foregoing discussion, certain points may have sounded so much like a stratificational description that it may be wise to point out exactly where stratificational grammar is perceived to be incompatible with Gestalt linguistics. Let us take as a point of departure the most obvious similarity, the gestaltist potential for treating entities not as real things but as abstractions from a totality. This sounds remarkably like the stratificational principle, taken directly from Hjelmslev, that a totality consists not of things but of relations. The by now classic treatment of *go* is a good illustration.

Sydney Lamb has liked to begin this illustration by writing "GO" on a blackboard and asking what we know about it. The properties listed were more or less these: *Go* has two alternant forms, ^M/go/ and ^m/wend/. ^M/go/ consists of two morphophonemes, *g* and *o*, the latter having two phonemic realizations, /əw/ prepausally, /ɔ/ elsewhere. ^M/wend/, which occurs only with the preterite morpheme, falls into the same class as *send* and *lend*, conditioning a special preterite allomorph. One could also trace down to the features of the phonemes and exhaust the description in this direction. *Go* occurs in isolation, but also in combinations, such as with *under* and *fore*. For all these there are various syntactic and semantic combinations that can be traced out in this direction. The result might look something like figure 1. When the diagram was completed, Lamb would step back and ask, "Now does this diagram tell us everything we know about *GO*?" Upon receiving an affirmative answer, he would erase *GO*, connect the ends of the lines, and point out that since no connections were lost by the erasure, no information about *GO* was lost. *GO* itself, then, was nothing more than the sum of these connections. The "real thing" *GO* evaporated and became nothing more than a location in a relational network. It would appear that stratificational grammar has effectively eliminated the atoms of the reductionist approach, and thus has achieved a goal of Gestalt linguistics.

In fact, however, stratificational grammar has substituted one set of atoms for another. The various relationships have become the new atoms of a new sort of reductionist description, even when they are not reified by some attempt to connect a stratificational network with a human neural net. The essence of the problem is that *GO* is regarded as the totality of its connections. Substitute "the whole" for "*GO*," "sum" for "totality," and "parts" for "connections," and you have the very antithesis of the gestaltist position. Of course, the question very naturally arises, what could be missing from a description

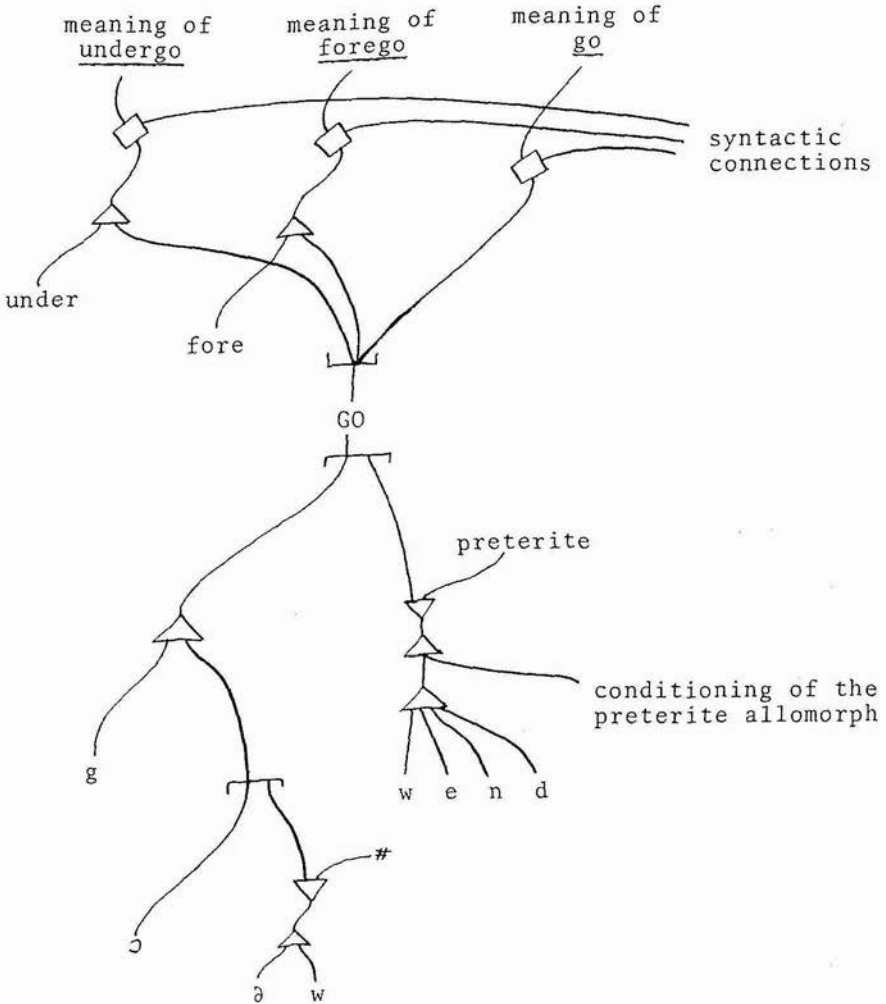


FIG. 1

that enumerates all the connections of *GO*? The answer lies in use, in the way speakers actually use the word, in its associations, in what Firth calls its collocations, the company it keeps, all of which is outside the realm of a purely internal grammatical description, and all of which contributes to the indivisible totality from which characteristics may be abstracted. Stratificational grammar, then, turns out to be quite an unusual reductionist model, but reductionist nonetheless. To find a way to make such a model compatible with Gestalt linguistics, we must return to the gestaltist position and examine it in a bit more detail.

III

At the end of section I, I mentioned that a field approach to the description of semantics, which means a description of language use, did not necessarily imply the need for a field approach to internal grammar. To see how this is so, we need to consider two general matters of linguistic description. The first matter concerns Householder's famous distinction between God's-truth linguistics and hocus-pocus linguistics. This issue revolves around two related questions. First, is structure innate in speech or is it imposed by the linguist? Second, is there only one correct analysis for linguistic problems, if we could find it?¹ The God's-truth linguist will answer that structure is innate in speech, and that there is therefore only one correct analysis. It is the duty of the linguist to discover that innate structure and with it the correct analysis. The hocus-pocus linguist will answer that structure is imposed by the linguist, and that there is therefore no one correct analysis. Each analysis is to be judged independently in terms of its own purpose and utility. In recent years this debate has been little noticed, and most linguists have thought of the question so little that they would be hard put to describe themselves. Yet the practice and mode of debate that has characterized recent linguistics has made it clear that most practicing linguists today are quite definitely out to discover God's truth. This is certainly true of the transformationalists in their practice, and the tendency toward a God's-truth approach can also be discerned in the work of many stratificationalists. But currently practicing Gestalt linguists appear to take the hocus-pocus approach to linguistics, and it is this attitude that makes possible an analysis under which Gestalt linguistics and stratificational grammar can be made compatible. To see how this is done, we must turn to the second of our general matters of linguistic description, the construction of linguistic models.

Kenneth Pike (1959) has offered quite a useful typology of linguistic models using particle, wave, and field descriptions. The three may be characterized briefly as follows: The particle description is our classical reductionist model. There are entities to be defined, and the various arrangements of these entities compose the structure of the object under investigation. Pike is, of course, borrowing his classification from physics, and the particle model of light is his obvious point of comparison. The wave model of light is equally clearly the point of comparison for the wave model, although the application of such a model in linguistics may not be so clear. One area of linguistics particularly suited to such a description would be the physical acoustics of speech, the dynamics of formant structure, transitions, bursts, band-limited noise, and the like. The field model needs little explanation, as it is very much like what we have already discussed as the approach required in certain parts of a gestaltist description. Now Pike in presenting this typology suggests that each approach has its particular merits. Each can throw a certain light on the data being examined, and so each should be exploited for whatever it can offer a linguistic analysis. From this it is a very simple and natural step to suggest that different

aspects of the total phenomenon of language can best be described by different models, that no one model is best for the whole of language, and that an optimal description of language will have to be multi-modal. Such a position is in no way incompatible with Gestalt linguistics, and, indeed, at least one gestaltist (Anttila 1977) has explicitly made a very similar suggestion. This being so, it follows that the gestaltist preference for a field approach in the description of external grammar, and also perhaps as an integrative framework to tie together all the various kinds of linguistic descriptions, in no way requires that that same approach be used for every part of language. In particular, it is entirely possible that a particle or wave approach might be much better for a description of internal grammar.

IV

We arrive now at the final stage of our investigation, the point at which we must ask how the various models are to be integrated. For internal grammar there seems to be no objection to the use of a stratificational-type particle model. While its adequacy has occasionally been questioned, the challenges have been met without great difficulty (Reich and Dell 1977; Christie 1976; and references in the two articles). A stratificational grammar, then, describes the structure of a language, taking that term in the Praguian sense. But a description of the structure alone tells us rather little about the language as a whole. What is needed is a description of how that structure is used by a native speaker/hearer, a real human being. This use is best modeled by a field description of a gestaltist type, and the only requirement that we need to impose on our various descriptions is that they not be incompatible; that is, the description of the internal grammar must not be of a type that could not possibly be put into use, and the description of the external grammar must not be of a type that could not integrate and make use of structure. This requirement, be it noted, as simple as it is, is by no means trivial. Indeed, it is the failure to meet this requirement that most strongly disqualifies transformational grammar as a possible internal description. What emerges from this, then, is a description of language that is complex and diverse, yet in certain ways integrated. A field approach will hold together the description of the external grammar, which will certainly be gestaltist, and the description of the internal grammar, which will be reductionist, but of the stratificational variety. When one adopts a multi-modal, hocus-pocus approach to language description, the alleged incompatibility of Gestalt linguistics and stratificational grammar vanishes completely.

NOTE

1. I have adapted these questions from Kenneth L. Pike and Eunice V. Pike (1955). It is interesting to note that at the time this was published, Pike seemed to regard himself as being on the God's-truth side of the matter (see the references to his own work in sections I.1 and I.2). By 1959, however, Pike seemed to be leaning more towards something like the hocus-pocus position (Pike 1959).

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