Doing things with grammar?

Alice Corr, University of Birmingham

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1 Introduction

What does it mean to "do things" with grammar? Even with the caveat that "doing things" with language can mean different things to different people, there is general consensus that we can "do things" with language. For example, we can use language to get someone's attention (1a); to express an affective mental state 1b); to assert the truth—or *truthiness* (Colbert 2005)—of a state of affairs (1c-d); or, to "change the world" (i.e. bring about a new state of affairs) in various ways (1e):

(1) a. Hey, you!
b. Oh gawd, what a mess.
c. I love her, and she loves me.
d. [...] you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides. (Donald Trump, August 15, 2017)
e. You're fired!

In this squib, I make the trivial, yet simultaneously non-trivial, observation that all of these instances of "doing things" with language also mandate that we "do things", first, with grammar. Moreover, I claim that there is no way in which we could do these things—at least, not in an intuitively comparable way—*without* deploying grammar in a way that is necessarily species-specific and, in turn, linguistically so.

I frame this observation within a recently resurrected line of research on conversation-oriented units of language (e.g., vocatives, utterance particles, interjections) within the generative tradition, known variously as the syntax of "speech acts" (Speas & Tenny 2003), "discourse" (Haegeman & Hill 2013), "interaction" (Wiltschko 2017), or, to use the term adopted here, the "utterance" (Corr 2017, forthcoming). These works challenge the traditional notion that grammar—and its largest building block, viz. the sentence—should exclude the dynamic and interpretative aspects of linguistically-codified human communication.

Within this line of research, I have claimed (in, e.g., Corr 2017, forthcoming) that the grammar plays a larger role than is typically recognised in constructing the universe of discourse; and that a radical rethinking of how we conceptualize the grammatical architecture is required in order to capture the intuition that language users can "do things" with utterance information and the units of language through which it is codified.

This body of work, including my own, has centred empirical considerations in advocating for the so-called *syntacticization* of discourse, i.e. the context of the utterance. Thus far, however, relatively little consideration has been given to the conceptual concerns which arise in the attempt to "syntacticize" elements of the pragmatic, leaving we proponents ill-placed to offer counter-arguments to conceptual rebuttals that have been raised against the proposal to incorporate utterance information into the architecture of grammar.

Here, I argue that a syntax for the utterance is not only empirically necessary, but is entirely compatible with a long philosophical tradition—and the project for a universal grammar (Arnauld & Lancelot 1660; Chomsky

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1966; Hinzen & Sheehan 2013; Mendívil-Giró 2018)—which holds that language is a system of thought. Specifically, I align myself with the recent line of enquiry of 'unCartesian' linguistics pursued by Wolfram Hinzen and his associates, whereby the mind is (necessarily) grammatical, insofar as the human ability to *refer*—i.e. to build a bridge between our inner world and the one outside—is mediated through the architecture of grammar, such that reference itself is configurational, a product of grammatical structure-building.

Theoretically, I take the behaviour of conversational units of language as a window into the indexical nature of language, arguing that these items provide insight into how language participates in world-building, and, in particular, how it mediates between intensional objects and the extensional world. In so doing, this program of research brings together the recent flurry of work seeking to incorporate aspects of the context of the utterance into the syntax, a line of enquiry broadly founded on empirical considerations, with the pursuit of explanatory adequacy on conceptual terms, viz. the philosophical arguments for the organisation of grammar as not merely expressing, but *yielding*, our (species-specific) mode of thought.

1.1 The idea

I argue for a conceptual rethinking of how we model the grammar-discourse interface by reframing the referential properties of utterance grammar in terms of grammatical rather than semantic reference. That is, rather than assume an architecture of grammar where syntax is a purely formal (specifically, a desemanticized) system, I take the view that syntax and semantic reference co-vary, such that reference is not, in fact, semantic, but grammatical.

Specifically, I draw on the *topological mapping theory* of the so-called unified grammar of reference, as originally proposed in Longobardi (2005) and latterly extended in Sheehan & Hinzen (2011) and Hinzen & Sheehan (2015) and associated work. On this approach, words gain their reference through being inserted into a basic configurational template composed of a descriptive INTERIOR and a grammatical EDGE:

(2) The Phasal Template (Sheehan & Hinzen 2011)
[EDGE [INTERIOR]]

Crucially, as that grammatical structure increases in size by extending the structure at its edge, so too does its referential strength (cf. also Martín Hinzen 2014:98). My contention is that if grammatical complexity covaries with referential strength, and utterance-oriented items are referentially "strong", then utterance constituents should be grammatically complex constituents. That is, the theory predicts that utterance items, if syntacticized, involve an expansion of functional structure and movement into the templatic 'edge' commensurate with their referential function.

1.2 Outline

In what follows, I put forward arguments for why this might be the case. In so doing, I address the conceptual motivation for a syntax of the utterance, in order to defend a conceptual shift to a so-called grammar of reference in modelling aspects of the pragmatic dimension of language.

2 What does the grammar codify?

The basic concern within formal syntactic theory is said to be to appropriately characterise the nature of human language, where language—'by definition a generative grammar' (Chomsky 2016:4) is conceived as a mental object, an I-LANGUAGE ('standing for internal, individual, and intensional', ibid.). The 'mental grammar', or 'I-language', of the generative enterprise standardly conceives of language as formal-computational, structure-building machine, in which a context-free syntax combines a finite set of discrete units into a theoretically limitless number of meaningful expressions of theoretically limitless size through a simple, recursive operation (currently known as MERGE)

which takes two objects, A and B, yielding a new object, A,B:

(3) MERGE (A,B) = A,B

On such an approach, syntax is understood to be autonomous of thought, interacting with meaning only indirectly through an interface which sends its hierarchically-structured objects (aka 'sentences')[1] to be mapped onto a semantic representation accessed by the conceptual-interpretative systems. This enables syntax to produce context-blind grammatical sentences that are ostensibly "independent of meaning" (Chomsky 1957:17), insofar as they make little sense in any real-world scenario (that they are nonsensical is therefore due to considerations external to language):

(4) Colorless green ideas sleep furiously. (Chomsky 1957:15)

Of course, such sentences are not "independent of meaning" (Chomsky 1957:17) in a broader sense, not least since they would be perfectly acceptable in, say, poetic registers, or other forms of figurative expression, as has been frequently pointed out. This is unlike sentences such as (5), for which it is impossible to extract any semblance of identifiable meaning from the sentence as a single whole:[2]

(5) *Furiously sleep ideas green colorless. (Chomsky 1957:15)

Indeed, the lack of a "real-world" scenario which a sentence such as (4) would accurately describe is really a problem for reference, and arguably no more so than *the current king of France is bald*. Moreover, such sentences seemingly "make sense" on a cursory glance: that is, it is only through active examination of each word's lexical content that their nonsensical nature comes about, once we realize that the sum of their lexical contributions results in oxymoron.

In other words, sentences such as (5) do not show how grammar builds structure without regard to meaning. On the contrary: the reason that sentences such as (4) make sense despite the lack of "real-world" correspondence—and why sentences such as (5) do not—is precisely *because* grammar creates their meaning.

In (4), it is the construction of relations *between* lexical items—in a particular order relative to each other—that imbues the sentence with (ostensibly nonsensical) meaning. Combining IDEAS + GREEN and GREEN IDEAS + COLORLESS yields in both cases relations of attribution. The combination of these, in turn, yields a more complex concept COLORLESS GREEN IDEAS, identifiable grammatically as a nominal phrase, and thus semantically as an object (which itself contains an ontological object IDEAS, where GREEN and COLORLESS are attributes of that object).

The combination of COLORLESS GREEN IDEAS + SLEEP yields a relation of predication, which we might call an event, a proposition, or a verbal or clausal phrase. Whether COLORLESS GREEN IDEAS + SLEEP is a verbal phrase or something larger is due to the morphological ambiguity of English 'sleep': if the sentence at hand were, instead, *colorless green ideas are sleeping*, the ambiguity disappears, since English lexicalizes the relevant aspectual distinction (here, continuous aspect) morphosyntactically.

That is, at each stage of syntactic construction, it is precisely through the manipulation of grammar that larger categories of "meaning"—and differences thereof—are produced, in a way that is both systematic and predictable. On the other hand, no meaning at all is retrievable from (5) beyond its individual lexical items, because the lack of grammatical relations between words, and then between phrases, prevents further complex concepts from being built on the basis of those

[1] Strictly speaking, since the emergence of phase theory, current syntactic theory is no longer limited to the sentence as the maximal unit of analysis. In practice, however, the sentence continues to be taken as the maximal unit of syntactic structure in much work considered to fall within the remit of theoretical syntax.

[2] For the avoidance of doubt, I note that "furiously sleep ideas" as a case of locative inversion is marginally acceptable for me (as an L1 English speaker) in an elevated, written register.