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Synthetic Syntax, Meaning, and Philosophical Questions

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Introduction to *Synthetic Syntax, Meaning and Philosophical Questions*

The papers in this volume are concerned with two main issues. They are, firstly, the integration of syntactic and semantic perspectives on verbal communication with special attention to the factors at the interface between experience and verbal means, and, secondly, the role of language in philosophical concepts. A number of philosophical concepts are approached from the perspective of language analysis. It is argued that complex verbal constructs are *synthesised* through the integration of a range of perspectives on simple components, and that there are perspectives on non-verbal experience which act as disposing factors at the interface between verbal means and non-verbal experience. In these papers, it is mainly the syntactic and semantic perspectives that are integrated, although one must allow for other factors, pragmatic and stylistic, in forming complex *constructs*. We thus speak of synthetic, and not analytic, syntax. Verbal constructs perform a range of functions in communication, one of which is the representation of reality. Part of our reality is a verbal *construction* of it. It is the verbal construction of reality that overlaps with a number of philosophical concepts. While not all philosophical issues can be said to be purely linguistic, many involve the careful definition of terms and linguistic distinctions, thus language analysis can shed light on concepts such as truth, knowledge, and 'the good', and it is here that linguistic semantics meets philosophy. A further issue explored is the centrality of language in what it is to be human, and the ways in which it can lead to misleading constructions of reality.

Language analysis requires a clear conceptual framework which addresses acknowledged difficulties. Apart from the choice of theoretical and methodological approach in linguistics, which is bound up with questions in the philosophy of science (and I have discussed elsewhere, Rastall 2019[1]), there are three apparently contradictory issues at the beginning of the linguistic analysis of verbal communication (spoken or written). (The term 'verbal communication' is intended to cover actual utterances in speech (speech acts, expressions) as well as particular texts in writing; tokens not types.) All three issues are interconnected.

First, any speech act or text can be considered from multiple perspectives, but analysis requires the selection of a single perspective at a time. Whereas a full understanding of any verbal communication implies the integration of perspectives to arrive at its totality, or wholeness, along with its position in a specific situation and context, each analysis (phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, discoursal, social, psychological, etc.) is an abstraction from a complex phenomenon. One danger is clearly that of getting a distorted view through the isolation of a single perspective. In particular, there has often been a concentration on either syntax or semantics with insufficient consideration of their integration. Indeed, in some approaches the one seems irrelevant to the other. Similar remarks could be made about approaches to phonology and morphology, but those areas are not the concern of this work. Another danger is that of presupposing

1 Rastall, Paul. 2019. *Bottom-up Linguistics – perspectives and applications.* Brno : Masaryk University Press.

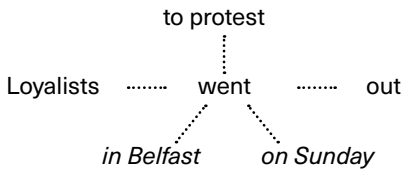
an analysis in one perspective in order to focus on another of interest to the researcher. Thus, one finds a misleading presupposition of (usually) traditional syntactic analyses in order to focus on semantic or pragmatic issues, and conversely an assumption of 'meaning' in syntactic analysis. More generally, the verbal expression is too often seen outside its wider communicational context, in particular its function in a communicative act. Conversely, a focus on speech functions can too often be isolated from syntactic and semantic considerations.

Second, any speech act or written text is linear in time (and space in the case of writing), but no verbal expression is uni-dimensional. Apart from paratactic features (often called 'prosodic' or 'supra-segmental' in other approaches), such as stress, intonation, and rhythm and non-verbal gestures (or icons in writing), we have to take into consideration both syntactic and semantic non-linear relations, including multiple combinations of signs, relative clauses, and central and non-central meanings.

Third, verbal expressions appear to be separate from other components of perception and cognition – language is our central means of orientation to the world –, but the focus on the individual utterance or text is misleading. Part of the problem is the objectification of communication for the purposes of analysis. One must remember that any utterance or text is, at it were, a stage extracted from a complex communicative process between communicating organisms. Thus, awareness of the communication situation including the interlocutors, the context of discourse including previous relevant utterances or texts, perceptions of the external world, thought processes, memories, attitudes, and existing knowledge are connected to the verbal expression, which takes place in a complex process of energy transmission involving electrical signals and their processing in the central nervous system of interlocutors through mechanical energy in the process of articulation, sound energy in acoustic transmission (light in visual communication), and auditory impulses. It may be useful, or even necessary, for the purposes of analysis to treat utterances or texts (or their components and stages) as *objects*, but they are in fact *actions* or, from a third-party perspective, *events*.

For example, an utterance (from a news report) such as *Loyalists went out to protest in Belfast on Sunday*, might occur as a response in the context of a question such as, *What happened in Belfast?,* or as a piece of information of potential interest to the receiver. It is clearly informative in function and involves memories and an assessment of what is relevant to the interlocutor. The reference to 'loyalists' and Belfast inevitably connects the text to wider knowledge of, and attitudes to, the history of Northern Ireland. Written representations do not show us the intonation or stresses in the utterance, which might indicate mere factuality, or boredom, irony, … From a syntactico-semantic point of view, the utterance relates a reference to the named individuals to a characterisation of their actions. *Went* is linked to different dimensions of experience, *out* for direction, *to protest* for collateral information about their purpose, and *last night* for the time. The past tense of *went* in combination with *on Sunday* indicates a (particular) past Sunday. Non-explicit non-linear information includes the ideas that it was loyalists who protested and that they came from Belfast. In other cases, pronominals might make the non-linear information explicit (*The protesters expressed their anger*). It is important to see that different areas of experience are brought together in the linear-temporal sequence. Other combinations are conceivable for similar information according to the function of the utterance and what is considered relevant or the focus of attention; *It was on Sunday that loyalists went out to protest in Belfast*, *Belfast was where loyalists protested on*

Sunday, etc. We arrive at linear patterns and the 'selection' of them through complex disposing factors, which lead to signs referring to areas of experience, their connections, and the ways the experience is conceived. We might try to represent the different dimensions of named experience, as follows, with dotted lines to show synthesised information-bearing units:



It is obvious that there are multiple syntactic and semantic non-linear relations. The signs in the example relate to different areas of experience, and are brought together into a complex message in linear form, i.e. they are synthesised in conventionally determined patterns with unconsciously adopted conventional perspectives on reality to provide qualitative information. Thus, an act of 'going' can be seen in relation to 'how', 'when', 'why', 'where', 'with what/whom' and must be seen in relation to conventional time distinctions. Such patterns are part of the conventional verbal construction of reality, which are outside the control of the speaker. The perspective of qualities and quantities, by contrast, is associated in English with nominals rather than verbs, as are determinacy and animacy. In some languages, such as Chinese or Malay, classifiers are verbal requirements associated with nominals. The application of such patterns in communication involves unconsciously acquired behaviours.

Similarly, unconsciously applied linguistic conventions are involved in mediating information. That is, information about similar areas of experience can be put together in different ways (e.g. *Fred went down the stairs; Fred descended the stairs*, *Fred followed Mary; Mary preceded Fred*, etc.); the differences imply the application of criteria at the interface of verbal means and non-verbal experience for communication and the way reality is verbally constructed. English uses the adverbial, *out*, for direction, but that aspect of meaning might be included in the verb as in French (*est sorti*) or expressed morphologically as in Russian (*vyxod'il*[2]). English distinguishes *went* from *has gone* in a way that neither French nor Russian does, and Russian distinguishes *his* 'belonging to the subject' (*svoj*) from *his* 'belonging to another male' (*jevo*). The time reference, *on Sunday*, might be expressed without a preposition as in French autonomous syntagms (*le dimanche*). What such comparisons show is that the way we combine linguistic signs plays a significant role in how we construct meaning. We have conventional means of formulating the perceived, conceived, or remembered experiences, and grammatical factors (outside any conscious control) such as tense or aspect also play a role in our verbal constructions of reality. There is no simple relation of expression to experience; the relation is always mediated by conventions. Further conventions provide ways of *sequencing* the verbalised components of experience.

All of the verbal components we have referred to are seen as objects for analytical convenience, and to that extent *static*, but one must bear in mind that communication is a dynamic

2 As opposed to *vyšel* referring to the act of going out. *Vyxod'il* suggests that the person went out and returned. Obviously, aspectual usage in Russian is a very different way of looking at reality from what we find in English.

process and that the entities we use for analysis are constructs we set up in order to understand the process. We cannot assume that our constructs and physical and cognitive reality are isomorphic. Language is in a constant state of flux (both for the individual and for the speech community), illustrated by the constant drift in meaning (see – *Can meanings change?*). One must distinguish analytical convenience and the constructs we use in talking about verbal communication from the physical and cognitive reality, and one must try to see the speech act as a function of multiple disposing factors and as playing a role in a wider situation. This involves the integration of multiple points of view on the utterance or text, but it also involves relating verbal means to external reality through the disposing factors determining the instantiation of linguistic forms, what we might call the 'interface' of verbal means and non-verbal experience.

The notion of synthetic syntax is aimed at addressing the problems above from a theoretical perspective, and the studies of dispositional verbs, the verb, *feel*, and of quantitative expressions offer practical examples. Some semantic issues in natural language utterances are addressed in the attempt to specify the nature of meaning, and particular types of meaning such as the meaning of questions for the full communicative range and functions of interrogatives.

Syntactico-semantic considerations overlap with philosophical issues particularly where the understanding of verbal means is central to the elucidation of metaphysical or ethical concepts. Some of the papers in this volume address such questions as the meaning of *good* and there is an attempt to put the issue of truth for statements into a wider natural language perspective. Similarly, the study of the verb, *to know*, and the phenomenon of knowing offers linguistic perspectives on philosophical questions. In all cases, syntactic and semantic issues are brought together in communicational contexts. Philosophical concepts and propositions are seen as verbal constructions.

The idea that syntax is a process of conventionally patterned synthesis of verbal means associated with different areas of experience is central to semantic complexity. On this view, syntax is how complex meanings are synthesised under the influence of a range of disposing factors. The disposing factors at the interface of language and experience are illustrated in, for example, the roles of prepositions and in dispositional verbs. The factors at the interface of language and experience involve wider questions of the nature of language and its place in human social development and in human perspectives on existence.

Until the 1950s, syntax was relatively little studied. It was often just an add-on to clear up what was left after phonological and morphological analysis. Since then, syntactic studies have mushroomed. In fact, in many approaches, syntax became central to the understanding of language. Even if one does not accept that syntax is at the heart of cognitive processing in language, it is obvious that most utterances are organised combinations of simple or simpler expressions into autonomous wholes, and that therefore we need approaches to syntax to account for observed combinations, and the ability to form and understand complex utterances through emergent patterns. What is more difficult is to determine what syntax is and what it should do in linguistic explanation. One's attitude will depend on one's wider theory of language, and on one's view of the communication process.

Historically, there has been a long process of development in thinking. Most modern views have been most influenced by a long western tradition, which starts with the classification of 'words' in 'sentences' into the categories known as 'parts of speech' associated with Dionysius Thrax and developed by later Greek and Roman writers. Syntax, as the 'arrangement of words

in sentences' (associated with Apollonius Dyscolus, Priscian and others) dealt with what is left over from the analysis into parts of speech. That involved the study of the meaning and function of inflections and rules for combining words into sentences, and could include the study of the semantic relations between sentence parts. Gradually, syntax came to involve the analysis of sentences into types (simple, complex, compound) and the parsing of sentences into their components – main clause, subordinate or relative clause, subject, predicate, conjunctions, relative pronouns, and various types of phrases.

However re-worked, this 'top-down' conception persists in most versions of syntax. Some functionalist approaches (mainly of Dutch, French, or Czech[3] scholars) are exceptions. To some extent, the labels of the traditional grammar can be useful as crude indicators of the types of phenomena under discussion; but they must be treated with caution. The notions of the traditional grammar lack definition, and can be applied to the full range of languages and language phenomena only with extreme arbitrariness. Despite the many objections, a lot of modern approaches retain not just the labels, but also the (rather flimsy) content of the traditional grammar.

The objections should be sufficiently obvious on a moment's reflection. There is a lack of definition of many key terms – 'sentence', 'word', 'clause', etc. – and some circularity in whatever definitions are offered. The reality of utterances simply does not correspond to form-based definitions of 'sentence', and the categories (adjective, adverb, noun, etc.) are arbitrary and inflexible. The approach is far too much concerned with Indo-European languages, particularly classical ones. That is especially obvious in the notion of 'word', where many definitions do not even work for some IE languages. More importantly, syntax, as the analysis of sentences using an arbitrary classification, has little connection with observed communication, and often no connection with meaning-making in context. As a result, structuralist approaches can become straight-jackets in thinking.

This is especially true where no clear distinction is made between the linguist's analysis, often using a preconceived notion of structure, and the real world under discussion, whether the set of observed utterances or the supposed cognitive processes of the speaker-hearer. The ideas of the existence of 'zero phonemes' in phonology, or a binaristic principle in syntax, arise from theoretical presuppositions and requirements, such as the need for the unambiguous analysis of the initial symbol in a tree derivation, or of the combination in immediate-constituent analysis. In 'scale-and-category' grammars, the presupposition of a universal scale, from sentence to morpheme leads to many inconsistencies through 'level-skipping' and 'back-looping', introduced to immunise the theory and associated descriptions from refutation, or of commutation with 'zero', where Ø is a member of any set. More fundamentally, there are problems in all 'top-down' approaches over the definition of terms and their application to the great diversity of languages. In particular, the notion of 'sentence' in relation to utterances, and to where one 'sentence' ends and another begins, is quite arbitrary.

European functionalist approaches avoid most of these criticisms because in them sentences as observed utterances with associated paratactic features are distinguished from syntagms as models of combinatory and dependency relations. 'Sentences' are generally seen as models bring-

3 Unfortunately, the work by Czech scholars is less well known, but see Chovanec, 2014 for a useful recent collection. Chovanec, Jan. 2014. *Chapters from the History of Czech Functional Linguistics*. Brno : Masaryk University Press.

ing together different perspectives on verbal behaviour in relation to communicational situations and contexts. In those approaches, there are no preconceived structural frameworks, and due attention is paid to linguistic diversity. European functionalist approaches are thus much closer to synthetic syntax in a communicational context. (One should note that a classification of theoretically possible types which may or may not be observed, such as is found in Glossematics or Axiomatic Functionalism, is not the same as the adoption of a preconceived structure in reference to which observed languages must conform in some way.)

One of the advantages of seeing syntax as the synthesis of signs for different semantic areas is that it provides a way of linking syntactic with semantic perspectives on utterances as well as connecting syntactic-semantic complexes to multiple issues in discoursal situations and contexts. In this (broadly Saussurean) approach, the form and meaning of signs are just different ways of looking at the same thing. The sign is simultaneously both form and meaning; its function is to provide means for the transmission of information by constituting a physical means in the process of communication and a reference point in the organisation of experience, where each sign relates to a different broad area of experience. That relation is a matter of verbal conventions, different in each language. In order to form complex meanings, there are multi-dimensional patterns to bring together signs relating to different areas of experience. This process builds up our understanding in particular communication acts, and can be stored for longer-term understanding through verbal constructions of reality. Syntactically complex signs are also form-meaning complexes, but they contain the additional information of the relations of components. For example, *garden* and *flower* both separately have form and meaning, and so do *garden flower* and *flower garden*, but *garden flower* and *flower garden* do not just bring together references to different areas of experience, they also contain the information of the relation connecting the signs, and hence the perceived reality referred to. The synthesis is informational. The Saussurean view of the sign requires that extension. However, it should also be clear that the Saussurean notion of the sign raises the question of the relation of the sign to perceived and conceived reality, in particular the question whether concepts (such as 'truth', 'goodness', 'rightness', etc.) are purely verbal constructs existing in the languages they are expressed in or whether they are entities with some sort of extra-linguistic (universal) existence. Some of the papers in this volume aim to contribute to that issue.

This work is a collection of new papers, and builds on the previous work on 'bottom-up' linguistics, already referred to. It aims to provide some theoretical framework for this synthesising view of language as well as some examples. It is hoped that it will throw a light on issues in the philosophy of language both by addressing the linguistics of philosophically interesting expressions such as 'know', 'good', and truth and by addressing semantic questions about the nature of meaning and the meaning of questions. Certain features in the construction of meaning are also addressed. They relate particularly to the discrepancy between conventional verbal expression, which is misleading, and our actual understanding of reality. However, the nature of the verbal construction of reality, and the discrepancies between the verbal construction of reality and our awareness of physical and biological reality raise questions about how language constructs reality and why language can be successful, but very misleading. Those questions are also addressed as part of the overlap between language analysis and broadly philosophical issues.

References are placed at the end of each paper. As the papers are intended to be self-standing but centred on the main themes, there is some repetition, but I hope the integration and con-

nectedness of the papers will be sufficiently obvious. I am grateful to Dr. Aleš Bičan of Masaryk University for reading some of the papers in draft and offering valuable criticisms and suggestions, and would also like to thank Dr. Jana Pelclova for her assistance in the publication. I am, of course, solely responsible for the content of the work and any errors in it.