

ON A FULLY DEVELOPED SYSTEM OF LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION

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In this paper I offer a preview of the scope of linguistic description, insofar as the field of linguistics touches on questions of the meanings of sentences. I take the subject matter of linguistics, in its grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic subdivisions, to include the full catalogue of knowledge which the speakers of a language can be said to possess about the structure and structural affinities of the sentences in their language, and their knowledge about the appropriate use of these sentences. I take the special explanatory task of linguistics to be that of discovering the principles which underlie such knowledge. I will exhibit the range of information which speakers possess about the sentences in their language by examining, as thoroughly as I know how, one English sentence. The sentence I have chosen for this demonstration is simple and short and extremely easy to understand; it is the four-syllable question, MAY WE COME IN?

Instead of beginning with a set of observations about a particular utterance of our sentence, by a particular speaker, on a particular occasion, examining all of the social and psychological and acoustic and biological and physical aspects of the situation to which we can gain access, and speculating about which of these can be said to exemplify specifically linguistic facts about the sentence in question, I will conduct a thought-experiment that will be simpler and more limited and that will be guaranteed to point solely to linguistic information. The thought-experiment I have in mind is this: we are to assume that we know, about some real-world situation, only one single fact, and that is, that somebody uttered the sentence MAY WE COME IN? A qualification on the nature of that information is that we have it in a notation which fails to include any understanding of the voice quality of the speaker or the manner of utterance. We know

only that it was an utterance of the English sentence that we ordinarily have in mind when we write, MAY WE COME IN?

Our task is to make explicit everything that we know about the sentence as a linguistic object, and everything that we know, as speakers of English, about the situation, or class of possible situations, in which it was uttered. We will be interested, in short, in the grammatical form of the sentence, the meanings and grammatical properties of its words, and in the assumptions we find ourselves making about the speaker of the sentence and about the setting in which it was uttered.

Our account will exclude information about the range of possible phonetic realizations of the sentence, and we will furthermore disregard the uninteresting possibility that the sentence was uttered hypotactically: we will not bother with the infinite range of possible conditions for the utterance of this sentence that includes somebody responding to the request that he pronounce four English monosyllables, or a speaker of a foreign language imitating an English utterance he once overheard, or a librarian reading aloud the title of a short story.

Assuming that the sentence was uttered in conformity with the system of linguistic conventions whose character we are trying to make explicit, we will probably find ourselves imagining a situation involving: some kind of enclosure, call it E; at least three beings, call them A, B, and C; one of whom, A, is a speaker of English and is the utterer of our sentence; one of whom, B, is believed by A to be a speaker of English and who is the addressee of our sentence; and some other being, C, who is a companion of A. (I say "being" rather than "person", since C might be, for example, A's pet beaver.) We further assume that A believes that he and C are

outside the enclosure E, that A believes B to be inside E, that A is interested in the possibility of his gaining admission to E, in C's company, and that A believes that B has the authority--or represents somebody who has the authority--to decide whether or not A and C may enter E. We further understand that the uttering of this sentence is an act which socially requires B to do something--in particular, to say something--it being understood that what he says will count as authorizing or forbidding the move into E on the part of A and his companion C.

These, then, are the main things that we might find ourselves imagining, on learning about a particular situation that somebody has made the request, MAY WE COME IN?. This is the most straightforward understanding we might have of the appropriateness conditions for uttering our sentence. Actual situations in which the utterance is used may depart from this description in several ways and for several reasons: some of A's beliefs may be mistaken; A may be speaking insincerely; the number of A's addressees may be greater than one; and the number of A's companions may be greater than one; and other arrangements of the personnel are conceivable.

As linguists we need to ask what it is about the structure of the sentence MAY WE COME IN? that makes it possible for speakers of English to agree on the nature of the conditions in which it can be used. We may begin our analysis of the sentence with an analysis of its words, one at a time, beginning with MAY.

The only syntactic information we will need to appeal to is the information that the sentence is a question, that its subject is the pronoun WE, that its main verb is COME, that it contains, in association with this verb the modal auxiliary MAY, and that the verb COME has a directional complement IN. The word MAY, when used as a modal auxiliary, has three functions that will interest us here, and these

are separable as its (1) epistemic, (2) pragmatic, and (3) magical functions. In its epistemic function, it is used in connection with likelihood-estimating expressions such as HE MAY NOT UNDERSTAND YOU. In its pragmatic function, it is used in sentences utterable as parts of permission-granting or permission-seeking acts, such as YOU MAY COME IN NOW. In its magical function it is used in the expression of wishes, blessings and curses, such as MAY ALL YOUR TROUBLES BE LITTLE ONES or MAY YOU SPEND ETERNITY ROLLER-SKATING ON COBBLESTONES.

The magical function appears only in sentences with initial MAY, but there only if the sentence is not construed as a question. YOU MAY SPEND ETERNITY ROLLER-SKATING ON COBBLESTONES may count as a warning or a gloomy prediction, but not as a curse. Our sentence, MAY WE COME IN?, is a question and does not allow the magical interpretation of MAY.

The epistemic and pragmatic functions of MAY can be seen ambiguously in certain sentences, as for example in JOHN MAY LEAVE THE ROOM. The person who utters that sentence may either, in doing so, be authorizing somebody named JOHN to leave the room, or he may be expressing his belief in the possibility of that person's leaving the room at some time in the future.

The epistemic and pragmatic senses are not appropriate to every use of MAY, however; it happens that the two uses of the modal are associated with two grammatically quite distinct sets of contextual possibilities, and instances of ambiguity with respect to these two senses are instances of accidental overlap of these two context sets. I will content myself with merely giving examples: it is probably immediately clear that the permission-granting sense is completely

absent from JOHN MAY HAVE LEFT THE ROOM, and that the possibility-expressing sense is absent from MAY JOHN LEAVE THE ROOM? By that I mean that JOHN MAY HAVE LEFT THE ROOM does not permit a pragmatic interpretation, as, say, I HEREBY GIVE JOHN PERMISSION TO HAVE LEFT THE ROOM, and the question MAY JOHN LEAVE THE ROOM? does not permit an epistemic interpretation, as, say, IS IT POSSIBLE THAT JOHN WILL LEAVE THE ROOM?

These observations are to be accounted for by noting that the pragmatic sense of MAY simply does not show up with the so-called perfective construction, and that the epistemic sense does not show up in questions. It was because our sentence MAY WE COME IN? is a question that we knew it had to do with permission-granting.

The recognition that the sentence is a question, then, rules out, for interpreters of MAY WE COME IN? the possibility that MAY is used in either its epistemic or its magical senses. We are left with the assumption that it is used in its pragmatic sense, and therefore that it is used in a social situation involving permission-granting in some way. Permission-granting situations involve two parties, the person or persons accepted as having authority to grant the permission, and the person or persons whose actions are to be authorized. A sentence with pragmatic MAY may be uttered performatively, in which case the utterance is a part of a permission-seeking or permission-granting act, or it may be uttered non-performatively. In the latter case, it is a statement or question about somebody's having permission to do something. It is the non-performative use of pragmatic MAY which is taught in the classroom as the preferred way of speaking of permission-possession. This use is quite unnatural to most speakers of English and will be ignored here. For persons who have been influenced by the classroom tradition, our sentence has the possible interpretation HAVE WE BEEN GIVEN PERMISSION TO COME IN?, the interpretation, in other words,

which would be associated, in the speech of most of us, with the question CAN WE COME IN?. In what follows I will be disregarding the non-performative sense of pragmatic MAY.

In a performative utterance of a pragmatic MAY sentence, the possessor of authority is taken to be the speaker if the sentence is an assertion, the addressee if the sentence is a question. Thus, the speaker of JOHN MAY LEAVE THE ROOM is, in saying the sentence, authorizing John to leave the room. The sentence we are examining, however, is a question, and in uttering a question with pragmatic MAY, the speaker is acknowledging the addressee's authority with respect to the permission-granting gesture. This alternation of the authority role between the speaker of an assertion and the addressee of a question must be accounted for in terms of general principles of conversation and general principles in the logic of questions and answers.

Without touching on the details, it is at least clear, for the rules of two-party discourse, that the speaker and addressee roles alternate in ways exhibited in such exchanges as I DID A GOOD JOB / NO YOU DIDN'T or HAVE YOU SEEN HIM? / YES, I HAVE. In general, if A asks B a question, A acknowledges B's authority to answer the question, and B in trying to answer the question, acknowledges that acknowledgement. Any of the ways in which the A's sentence assigns separate roles to speaker and addressee must have those assignments reversed in B's contributions to the same conversation. In a sentence like JOHN MAY LEAVE THE ROOM, the speaker of that sentence is the authority with respect to the permission-granting act which a performance of that sentence may constitute. If that sentence is, as it is, an authorized answer to the question, MAY JOHN LEAVE THE ROOM?, it follows that the addressee of the question has the same role as the speaker of the corresponding assertion.

So far, then, we have seen how a speaker of English is able to reach certain conclusions about our sentence: from the fact that it is a question and contains the modal MAY, (1) it involves the permission-granting sense of MAY, and (2) it is the addressee of the sentence who is taken as having the right to grant the desired permission.

Recall that I have pointed out that assertions containing pragmatic MAY could be uttered as, or as a part of, or as constituting, permission-granting acts. Because of that fact, my use of the term 'assertion' was not quite appropriate--though I will not abandon it since I have not found a suitable alternative. An utterance of YOU MAY COME IN is not merely a statement declaring or asserting that some state of affairs exists--it is rather an instance of a type of utterance that has some sort of extra-linguistic validity as defined in particular sorts of social situations. It is a sentence, an utterance of which, under an appropriate set of conditions, constitutes an illocutionary act of the type that we have been referring to as permission-granting. A sentence like THE CAPITAL OF FRANCE IS PARIS cannot, in any perfectly straightforward way, be uttered as one step in a socially dynamic situation, but the sentence YOU MAY COME IN can.

We must ask, then, just what is the illocutionary force of the question MAY WE COME IN?. This question imposes on the addressee the obligation to exercise his authority. An utterance of the question, under the conditions mentioned above, is an illocutionary act whose effect is to get the other party to perform a related illocutionary act; an utterance on B's part of the answer YES or the answer NO to this question will be taken as an authorizing or as a forbidding act respectively.



I have mentioned several times the role of speaker and addressee as factors to deal with in the interpretation of utterances, and I have referred to the fact that in two-party conversations, the identity of the speaker and the addressee will systematically alternate. Aspects of the interpretation of sentences that relate to the speech act situation are known collectively as deixis, and reference to the participants in a speech act are covered by the term person deixis. When explicit reference is made in an utterance to the speaker and the addressee of the utterance, the English pronouns I and YOU are used; but we have seen from the analysis of assertions and questions with pragmatic MAY that not every appeal to the participants in a speech act involves the presence of one of these words. Other forms of deixis, soon to be mentioned in another context, are place deixis, involving reference to the location of the speech act participants (as seen in such words as HERE and THIS), and time deixis, involving indication, direct or indirect, of the moment of the speech act (as seen in such words as NOW and TODAY).

We turn next to the person-deictic pronoun in our sentence, the word WE. The traditional grammatical term for a linguistic form which identifies the speaker of a sentence is "first person", and the traditional label for pronouns of the type of English WE is "first person plural". This characterization is, of course, rather odd. If we identify the "first person" as the speaker--the one who pronounces the sentence containing the "first-person" form--then the description "first person plural" makes sense only in the case of choral recitation, speaking in unison. The English word WE has, actually, a quite different use. It identifies a group of individuals including the speaker of the sentence; it refers, in other words, to the speaker of the sentence and somebody else.

In many languages a distinction is made in their so-called "first person plural" forms depending on whether the group does or does not include the addressee of the sentence. Such languages distinguish an inclusive form, designating the speaker and the addressee (and maybe others), from an exclusive form, designating the speaker and one or more beings not including the addressee.

Linguists find it necessary to speak of the inclusive and exclusive uses of the English pronoun WE. In translating from English into a language which makes this distinction explicit, one needs, obviously, to assign one or another "clusivity" value to each instance of the pronoun. In descriptions of the speaker/addressee alternation in conversations, different values of WE must be assigned to the first contribution to each of the following conversational exchanges: DID WE MAKE A MISTAKE?/YES, WE DID. DID WE MAKE A MISTAKE?/YES, YOU DID.

In the sentence MAY WE COME IN?, it is clear that the WE is exclusive, and that was in fact the reason we were forced to imagine three beings in the situation calling for this particular utterance. The individual we have been calling C is the "somebody else" included in the scope of WE and distinct from the addressee, B. In the permission-granting situation, the person with authority and the person or persons seeking permission, are necessarily distinct, as we have seen. Since in a question with pragmatic MAY the addressee is the one with the authority, the addressee cannot be included in the scope of the subject expression.

So far, this is what we know: from the fact that our sentence is a question having MAY as its main modal, we know that it has to do with a permission-requesting situation; from the fact that it is a question rather than an assertion,

we know that the addressee is assigned the authority role; from a general understanding of permission-granting situations, we know that the person having authority is distinct from the persons who need and seek permission to enter, and therefore that the pronoun WE is used in the sense which is exclusive of the addressee.

We turn now to the third word, the word COME. We notice first of all that it is an action verb, and therefore the activity it identifies qualifies as something for which it makes sense to speak of granting permission. If our sentence were something like MAY WE UNDERSTAND YOUR PROPOSAL?, we would have had to reject it as a well-formed pragmatic-MAY question, since one does not speak of needing permission to understand something. As an action verb, furthermore, it is not an "achievement" verb. If our sentence were MAY WE SUCCEED ON THIS PROJECT?, it would have to be rejected as a pragmatic-MAY question, since SUCCEED, as an achievement verb, refers to carrying out an activity which leads, fortuitously, to a particular consequence; and one does not speak of needing permission to have good luck.

The verb COME, secondly, is lexically simple with respect to the type of activity it designates. In this way it is unlike a verb like SWIM, which has associated with it both the idea of motion and an understanding of the manner of motion. If our sentence were MAY WE SWIM IN?, we would have had to point out that this sentence can be used under two distinct conditions in a permission-seeking situation. Suppose, for illustration, that the speaker and his companions were swimming in a body of water that entered a cave, and they were addressing a person guarding the entrance to the cave. In that case, there is no question of their needing permission to swim, they are asking for

permission to move into the cave while swimming. The sentence, in that case, would have heavy stress on IN. Suppose, on the other hand, that the speaker and his companion have already been granted permission to enter the cave, and they wish to know whether they may do this by way of the stream, that is, by swimming, rather than by using some other means. In that case, it is understood that they have permission to move into the cave, and what they are seeking is permission to do this by swimming. In that case the sentence would have heavy stress on SWIM. The verb COME, I suggested, does not have this sort of lexical complexity, and so there is not the same sort of ambiguity with respect to which aspects of the situation are those for which permission is needed.

The verb COME, however, has other sorts of complexities. The description of the presuppositional structure of this verb requires reference to all three types of deixis-- person, place, and time.

For speaking of temporal matters in the semantics of natural language sentences, it is necessary to distinguish-- on the simplest level--the time of the speech event, on the one hand, and what we might call the time of focus, the time that is being referred to or focused on in the sentence. We can see how both of these types of references can figure in the description of a single sentence by considering a sentence like JOHN WAS HERE LAST TUESDAY. The time of focus is identified by the phrase LAST TUESDAY, and the time of the speech act is involved in the interpretation of the word HERE: HERE is the place where the speaker finds himself at the time of his pronouncing the sentence. (Even for fairly simple cases, it is necessary to distinguish more than just these two temporal reference points, but for the points I have in mind, these two will do.)

The role of deictic categories in the interpretation of sentences with COME may be observed with sentences of the form "X" CAME TO "Y" AT "T", where "X" is the moving entity, "Y" is the destination, and "T" is the time of focus. (Here, "T" is taken to be in the past, just for the sake of simplicity.) It happens that sentences of the form "X" CAME TO "Y" AT "T" are appropriate just in case any of the following conditions obtains:

- 1) the speaker is at Y at the time of the speech act
- 2) the addressee is at Y at the time of the speech act
- 3) the speaker was at Y at T
- 4) the addressee was at Y at T

To see that this is so, take JOHN, THE OFFICE, and YESTERDAY MORNING as values of "X", "Y" and "T" respectively. A sentence like JOHN CAME TO THE OFFICE YESTERDAY MORNING is appropriate under any of the four conditions just indicated. It is a sentence I can say appropriately if I am in the office when I say it, if you are in the office when I say it to you, if I was in the office yesterday morning when John came, or if you were in the office yesterday morning when John came. (There are uses of the verb COME in pure third-person narrative which are not covered by the description, and there are personal identifications with places distinct from physically being in a place for which COME is nevertheless appropriate; but on these matters the reader's indulgence is requested.)

Limitations on these appropriateness conditions appear when we substitute for the "X" and "Y" of the formula expressions of person deixis and place deixis respectively. For example, if I say I CAME THERE YESTERDAY MORNING, it is not possible that I am "there" now, because THERE is by definition a place where I am not now located; and it is also not possible that I was already there yesterday morning when I came.

But now what are we to say about our sentence, MAY WE COME IN? We have seen, from the fact that we are dealing with permission-granting MAY in an interrogative sentence, that our pronoun WE is exclusive of the addressee. That same conclusion could also have been reached by noticing its occurrence with the verb COME. COME is a verb of locomotion which indicates a change in location from some point of origin to some destination, this latter conceived of as a place where the speaker or the hearer is at the time of the speech act or was at the time of focus. In a permission-seeking utterance with the modal MAY, there is lacking a definite time of focus, and that leaves open only those possibilities that refer to the participants' location at the time of the speech act. Since the pronoun WE has to include the speaker and does not have to include the addressee, we are forced to include that WE is exclusive; since the addressee must be at the place of destination in order for the use of this sentence to be appropriate, he cannot be included in the group seeking to move toward that destination. Again our analysis supports the picture we had at the beginning, of A, on the outside, speaking on behalf of himself and C, also on the outside, and addressing the insider B.

The verb COME, like its partner GO, is one of the few verbs of motion in English that require a destination complement in syntactically complete sentences. In our case the destination complement has the form IN, which we may take as an ellipsis for IN(TO) THE PLACE, or the like. The particle IN ascribes to the destination the information that it is some sort of enclosure. That information, together with the change-of-location interpretation required of the verb COME, is what imposes the understanding that the moving entities have as their point of origin a location which is not within that enclosure. Notice that quite

different assumptions about the relative position of speaker and addressee would have been taken if the sentence had been MAY WE COME UP? or MAY WE COME THROUGH? or the like.

So far we have examined certain properties of the individual words of the sentence. In doing that we have fairly exhausted, because of the simplicity of the sentence, whatever there is to say about its grammatical structure as well, at least its "surface structure". There are current arguments in support of the claim that the deep structures of sentences will correspond to their fully specified semantic descriptions--including an account of their illocutionary force--but since my effort here is to uncover and detail such a semantic description, it will not be necessary to adjoin to my discussions any specific claims about the nature of the deep structure.

The illocutionary act potential of the sentence must be studied in the context of the systems of rules or conventions that we might choose to call discourse rules, a subset of which might be called conversation rules. We have seen, in what has already been said about the illocutionary force of our sentence, that it is not to be construed as a request for information, but as a request for the addressee to "perform" in some way. It is usable as a way of getting the conversational partner to perform the needed permission-granting (or, of course, permission-denying) act. In the sense that a question like SHALL WE COME IN? is an utterance spoken to get one's interlocutor to issue an order, the question MAY WE COME IN? would be spoken to get the addressee to grant permission. Because of its role in a changing interpersonal situation, a complete description of the sentence must specify the various social conditions which must be satisfied in order for it to be used appropriately. For various reasons, these may be stated as belief conditions which must be satisfied by the utterer of a sentence in order for us to acknowledge

that he has uttered the sentence in good faith. We have agreed, for example, that the speaker must believe that his interlocutor is inside E, that he and his companion are outside E, and that his interlocutor is a person capable of authorizing admission into E. By viewing these as belief conditions, we are able to recognize various ways in which the sentence may be uttered deviantly. It may be uttered mistakenly, in case the speaker's beliefs are incorrect; or it may be uttered insincerely, in case the belief conditions are not satisfied.

The speaker may be mistaken in his belief that he is outside the enclosure E; he will realize his mistake if his question is answered, WELL, IT LOOKS TO ME LIKE YOU'RE ALREADY INSIDE. He may be mistaken in his belief about the location of the addressee; he will realize that if he hears, from an unexpected direction, the reply, YOOHOO, HERE I AM. GO RIGHT ON IN. He may be mistaken in his beliefs about the relative social positions, with respect to this activity, of himself and his addressee. It may not be necessary for him to receive permission to enter, as he will find out if the answer is, OF COURSE. The person he is addressing may not have the authority to admit him, as he will learn if he hears the answer, DON'T ASK ME.

The sentence can be used "insincerely" in either of two ways. It may be used politely, in which case the assumptions associated with the sentence about the social dominance (on this occasion, at least) of the addressee, are intended as a polite social gesture; or it may be used ironically, as in cases where the suggested dominance relation is clearly contradicted by the realities of the situation. An example of an ironic use can be seen in a situation in which a prison warden addresses the question to a prisoner in his cell, or in the case of a pair of aggressive encyclopedia salesmen who have already entered the living room.



The conversation rules of a language govern not only the conditions under which it is appropriate to perform a permission-requesting utterance of the type we have been examining, but they must also determine the principles by which a speaker of English is able to recognize appropriate responses to the request. If the question is used in absolutely its most straightforward way--a rare occurrence, I would guess--the normal appropriate answers would be merely YES, YOU MAY or NO, YOU MAY NOT. Such an answer merely acknowledges that B does indeed have the requisite authority and that he does or does not tolerate the entering into his territory of A and C.

If, however, the question was asked in the way it was asked out of politeness, as an instance of the sort of social gesture that occurs in conversations between equals or near-equals, and if B recognizes and wishes to return the gesture, he would say something like YES, PLEASE DO or COME IN, BY ALL MEANS. These answers, having the form of imperatives, have associated with them some of the conditions appropriate to imperative sentences--one of these being that it is in the speaker's interest to have the addressee act as commanded. Thus, on being asked whether one would tolerate admission into a room, the person who responds with YES, PLEASE DO shows that he not only tolerates but desires such a move.

From observations such as these, it is now obvious that the rules of conversation must not only specify the appropriateness conditions for an utterance and the nature of the most straightforward appropriate second-speaker responses to utterances, but must be capable of making use of certain logical operations by which it can be shown that something equivalent to a straightforward response is deducible from the actual occurring response. In particular, such

principles would include the information that desiring implies tolerating, that necessary implies possible, etc.

Let me now summarize the various kinds of facts which must, I suggest, be included in a fully developed system of linguistic description.

The linguistic description of a language

- (1) must characterize, for each lexical item in the language
  - (a) the grammatical constructions in which it can occur,
  - (b) the grammatical processes to which it is subject in each relevant context,
  - (c) the grammatical processes which its presence in a construction determines, and
  - (d) information about speech act conditions, conversation rules, and semantic interpretation which must be associated in an idiosyncratic way with the lexical item in question;
- (2) it must provide the apparatus which characterizes
  - (a) the grammatical structures of sentences on the "deep" or abstract level, and
  - (b) the grammatical processes by which abstract linguistic structures are processed and become surface sentences;
- (3) it must contain a component for calculating the complete semantic and pragmatic description of a sentence given its grammatical structure and information associated with each lexical item;
- (4) it must be able to draw on a theory of illocutionary acts, in terms of which the calculations of (3) are empowered to provide a full account of the potential illocutionary force of each sentence;

- (5) it must be able to draw on a theory of discourse which relates the use of sentences in social and conversational situations; and
- (6) it must be able to draw on a theory of "natural logic" by means of which such judgments as the success of an argument or the appropriateness of elements in conversations can be deduced.