1 Theoretical preliminaries

1.0 Introduction

When human beings communicate with each other linguistically, they do not do so in isolated simple sentences. Rather, discourse is constituted by complex expressions made up of a number of clauses linked together in various ways. A necessary precondition for intelligible discourse is cohesion among these expressions, and a very important aspect of this cohesion involves the tracking of participants across clause sequences. When talking about sequences of situations in which the same participants are involved, it is necessary to refer to them in each clause in such a way that they can be identified as being the same as or different from the participants referred to in previous clauses. Moreover, speakers need to signal the temporal relations between situations, e.g. whether the situations occurred at the same time, whether one immediately followed the other, or whether one followed the other after an interval. Languages provide speakers with the means to indicate who is doing what to whom not only in simple sentences, but also across the chains of sentences of which discourse is composed.

In this book we will investigate these means in a variety of languages with the goal of uncovering some important aspects of the interaction between syntax and certain discourse processes. We will focus in particular on the relationship of clause-internal morphosyntax to clause linkage and cross-clause reference-tracking mechanisms. Our goal is to demonstrate that crucial features of clause structure such as case marking and voice options are intimately tied up with these interclausal phenomena and accordingly can be fully understood only with reference to them. Hence the analysis of the morphosyntax of the clause must, on this view,
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proceed from an interclausal and ultimately discourse perspective. It is necessary to clarify what is meant by ‘discourse’ in this context. Human beings engage in a variety of speech activities, e.g. chatting, discussing, arguing, lecturing, storytelling, etc. (see e.g. Gumperz 1982), and these activities may be grouped together into different types of discourse or speech genres, e.g. conversation, narrative, ritual speech, etc. (see e.g. Hymes 1974). We will limit the scope of this inquiry to narrative discourse, for several reasons. First, the problem to be investigated, the tracking of events and participants across clauses, shows up most clearly in this type of discourse. Secondly, many of the morphosyntactic phenomena which have traditionally been at the center of linguistic investigation, e.g. case marking, grammatical relations, and clause linkage, are crucially involved in reference and predication and therefore play fundamental roles in discourse tracking. Consequently by examining them from the point of view of their potential discourse functions we will provide more explanatory analyses of these phenomena. Thirdly, narrative texts are often the only kind of discourse data available on many languages. This amounts to a practical rather than a theoretical limitation. At present, data on other discourse genres, particularly conversation, are obtainable for only a very few languages, and therefore if one wishes to study the interaction of syntax and discourse in a wide range of languages, then one is forced to concentrate on narrative texts. Thus when we speak of the ‘discourse function’ of a particular form or construction, it must be kept in mind that we are talking about its function in a particular discourse type. It is entirely possible and indeed probable that the function of a form or construction could vary across different discourse genres, and such possible variation will be a significant area of future research, assuming that the necessary data become available. In this study, however, the focus is on narrative discourse.

This investigation will be carried out within the theory of Role and Reference Grammar [RRG]. A preliminary sketch of the theory appeared in Van Valin & Foley (1980), and aspects of RRG are discussed in a number of other works.¹ We assume no acquaintance with the theory in this presentation, and accordingly we will introduce and develop the theoretical constructs of RRG throughout this inquiry.
1.1 Functional syntax

The title of this book contains two terms, *functional syntax* and *universal grammar*, which require elucidation in order to situate this discussion firmly in the context of current linguistic theory. In this and the following section we will explicate these two notions from an RRG perspective.

Current theorizing in linguistics may be divided into two broad schools of thought which we will label *formal* versus *functional* orientations. Within each orientation there are a number of competing theories; the dominant formal theory is of course transformational generative grammar, but there is no comparable dominant theory among the functionalists. We will attempt to characterize the differences between these two points of view by comparing their positions on a number of fundamental issues.²

Perhaps the most fundamental issue of all concerns the nature of the object of linguistic inquiry. From a formal point of view, a language is ‘a set of structural descriptions of sentences, where a full structural description determines (in particular) the sound and meaning of a linguistic expression’ (Chomsky 1977:81). A structural description accomplishes this task by including (1) a representation of the sound of the expression in terms of a system of phonological units and their phonetic realizations, (2) a specification of the meaning-bearing grammatical units (morphemes), (3) a representation of the structural arrangements of the grammatical units, and finally (4) a representation of the meaning of the utterance (in a restricted sense) as derived from the meaning of the units and their configuration. A structural description of a sentence is thus a formal object composed of a number of formal representations, and a language is a (potentially infinite) set of these representations. Since the constituent elements of the structural description of a sentence make up what has traditionally been considered to be the grammar of the language, ‘language’, as a general concept, is in effect reduced to ‘grammar’, and accordingly linguistics, the study of language, is reduced to the study of grammar. ‘The study of generative grammar in the modern sense... was marked by a significant shift in focus in the study of language. To put it briefly, the focus of attention was shifted from “language” to “grammar” ’ (Chomsky 1981a:4). Thus the defini-
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tion of a language as a set of structural descriptions of sentences entails a change in the object of inquiry from language to grammar. The shift has important consequences for both the scope and goals of linguistic inquiry. Because linguistics is the study of the structural descriptions of sentences, only those areas of linguistic analysis which relate to the linking of sound and meaning – phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics – fall into the proper domain of linguistic investigation. This limitation of the scope of linguistics is not unique to contemporary formal theories; both Saussure and Bloomfield proposed similar delimitations of the field. Chomsky’s motivation is the same as Bloomfield’s: to apply the methodology of the natural sciences to the study of ‘language’ (cf. Bloomfield 1926, 1936): ‘The shift of focus from language (an obscure and I believe ultimately unimportant notion) to grammar is essential if we are to proceed towards assimilating the study of language to the natural sciences’ (Chomsky 1981a:7). Another parallel to Bloomfieldian theory in current Chomskyan theory is the exclusion of non-linguistic semantics from the domain of inquiry. Bloomfield’s defining away of semantics is well known (see 1933:139–44), and Chomsky now takes the position that the only aspects of semantics which are within the scope of linguistic analysis are those which constitute the ‘logical form’ of a sentence, i.e. ‘those aspects of semantic representation which are strictly determined by grammar’ (1977:5), e.g. interpretation of bound anaphora, scope of negation and quantifiers, and thematic relations (see also 1975:105). The meaning of words and the full semantic interpretation of expressions involves real-world knowledge and other not-strictly linguistic factors, and consequently they are excluded from consideration in both Bloomfieldian and Chomskyan theory. This is not true of all formal theories, however; Montague grammar is a notable exception.

The definition of a language as a set of structural descriptions of sentences is logically independent of the psychological orientation of a theory, but if it professes to make psychological claims, then this definition shapes the nature of those claims in certain respects. Chomsky’s main concern is a speaker’s knowledge of grammar, or linguistic competence, and for him ‘the fundamental empirical problem of linguistics is to explain how a person can acquire knowledge of language’ (1977:81). What does ‘knowledge
of language’ consist of? Because a language is a potentially infinite set of structural descriptions of sentences, and because human beings have a finite set of cognitive resources at their disposal, speakers must have internalized a finite set of rules which specify (generate) the structural descriptions. Thus the question concerning knowledge of language becomes one of knowledge of a set of rules specifying a potentially infinite set of formal objects. The next step is to ask how a person comes to know these highly complex formal rules, and we arrive at the ‘fundamental empirical problem of linguistics’ for Chomsky.

There are a variety of solutions that can be offered to this problem, none of which are supported by any strong psycholinguistic evidence. Chomsky’s proposal, that the abstract outlines of the rule systems are part of a human being’s genetic endowment (e.g. 1975, 1977, 1980b), is based on the apparent inability of current learning theories to account for the speed and ease of acquisition as well as for the richness and complexity of the resulting cognitive structures. The primary argument which is made in support of this view is the argument from the poverty of the stimulus. In Reflections on Language, for example, Chomsky argues that the structure-dependent nature of syntactic rules is not learned through experience and therefore must be a precondition for language learning and a feature of our innate language capacity. All claims that a given theoretical construct in generative grammar is innate are based solely on arguments such as this.3

Particularly relevant to these questions is the issue of the nature of this innate language faculty and its relation to other aspects of human cognition. Indeed, as Chomsky (1975:13, 33) points out, this is the crucial issue. No one doubts that human beings are born to talk and that there are in-built predispositions to language learning; consequently the fundamental issue is whether the genetically determined structures which make language acquisition possible are uniquely linguistic and independent of all other human capacities, or whether they are part of a general human learning schema which underlies linguistic and non-linguistic learning alike. Chomsky’s position is directly related to the notion of language which he assumes. The catalogue of innate linguistic principles includes such things as the X-bar schema for constituent structure, and conditions on rules and the interpretation
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of bound anaphora, and these are purely linguistic in application; they in no way relate to any aspect of human ability or cognition outside of language. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Chomsky describes these innate linguistic structures as an independent 'module' or 'organ' in the mind (see e.g. 1975, 1977, 1980b) which interacts with other mental modules or organs only in the actual use of language in concrete situations.

The goal of linguistics (at least for Chomsky) is thus to explain how human beings acquire their first language, and the strategy for accomplishing this goal is to characterize the innate language faculty (or language acquisition device) which makes this acquisition possible. This has definite consequences for linguistic theory and analysis. In light of this goal, the concept of explanation in the theory is directly tied to the problem of language acquisition, so that an analysis is considered to be explanatory only insofar as it contributes to the solution of this problem (see Chomsky 1965, Lightfoot 1980, Hornstein & Lightfoot 1981). In practice explanatory analyses take one of two forms: (1) showing that a given phenomenon can be subsumed under or derived from a principle or rule which has already been hypothesized to be part of the innate mental organ of language, or (2) demonstrating that a particular rule, constraint, etc. must be part of the innate mental structures. The methods of gathering data for these analyses is naturally influenced by the linguist’s ultimate goal. Since it is to uncover knowledge and not to analyze actual verbal behavior, naturally occurring speech, which is at best only an indirect reflection of underlying knowledge, is not the focus of analysis. Rather, the most direct means for getting at a speaker’s unconscious knowledge of language (grammar) would seem to be to present the speaker with sentences illustrating the theoretical construct(s) under consideration in order to elicit judgments of grammaticality of the sentences. From the judgments of grammaticality and (non-)synonymy the linguist is able to infer the principles underlying the sentences and to construct a model of the speaker’s grammatical knowledge. Since the knowledge consists of a set of generative rules capable of specifying an infinite set of structural descriptions of sentences, analysis is concentrated on deriving these structural descriptions from the hypothesized rules rather than on describing systematic oppositions among phonological,
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morphological, and syntactic categories (see Nichols 1979a).

It must be noted that not all formal theories have the psychological orientation and goals of transformational generative grammar; Montague grammar (Dowty 1979) and corepresentational grammar (Kac 1980) are two such formal theories. Relational grammar is oriented towards universals: ‘The basic question of linguistic theory can be stated very simply: what ways do natural languages differ, and what ways are they all alike?’ (Perlmutter 1980:195). Answering this question will accomplish the three primary goals of linguistic theory: (1) providing ‘a satisfactory characterization of the notion “natural language” that makes explicit the class of natural languages’ (ibid.); (2) providing explanations for the facts of particular languages; and (3) providing ‘adequate and insightful’ grammars of individual languages. We will discuss this set of goals for linguistic theory in more detail in 1.2 below, where we will see that this conception of the goals of linguistic theory is much less different from Chomsky’s than it appears at first glance.

In this discussion we have attempted to characterize the views of formal linguistic theories on a number of major issues. These views follow either directly or indirectly from the assumption that a language is a potentially infinite set of structural descriptions of sentences. We now turn to functionally oriented linguistic theories, and we will likewise describe their stands on the issues in relation to the conception of language that underlies them.

The theme unifying the various functional approaches is the belief that language must be studied in relation to its role in human communication. Language is thus viewed as a system of human communication, rather than as an infinite set of structural descriptions of sentences. Inherent in this conception of language is a claim about its primary function, namely, that it is an instrument of verbal interaction among human beings. Chomsky explicitly denies that communication is a necessary or even important function of language (see 1975:56–7, 1980b:229–30); rather, for him ‘human language is a system for free expression of thought, essentially independent of stimulus control, need-satisfaction or instrumental purpose’ (1980b:239). This ‘creative aspect’ has always been considered to be an essential feature of language by Chomsky (see e.g. 1965:6, 1975:56), and this creativity is the ability
of native speakers to produce and understand an (in principle) infinite number of sentences. This, of course, takes us right back to Chomsky’s definition of a language, and here again we find a direct relationship between it and a major theoretical claim.

It is important to clarify what is meant by ‘human communication’. Human beings do not communicate with each other in a vacuum but rather in socioculturally defined activities and situations in which the participants take on socially defined roles and statuses. There is, then, a significant sociocultural aspect to communication. Communication is often construed in a narrow sense to mean ‘conveying propositional information from one person to another’, and within such a view linguistic behavior consists primarily of referring and predicating about situations in the world, all other types of verbal behavior, e.g. asking questions or giving commands, being derivative of it. Silverstein (1976a, 1977, 1980a) has cogently argued that such a view is fundamentally mistaken and that referring-and-predicating is only one of the many socially constituted functions of language and not a privileged one at that. Hence in talking about communication, we do not mean this narrow sense but rather a concept encompassing the wide range of speech events found in a society, only one of which is reference and predication in the service of passing propositional information between interlocutors. In looking at communication in this way, we investigate ‘the purposes of speech to achieve particular socially recognized goals in terms of socially constituted role relations – in short, speech organized as an elaborate system of types of discourse events’ (Silverstein 1977:140). Thus the assumption that language is a system of human communication treats language as a crucial component of human social interaction and takes linguistic behavior, e.g. asserting, asking, promising, commanding, wishing and requesting, and the larger-scale speech activities which they constitute, to be social behavior. It would therefore be more accurate to say that language is a form of social action, in particular, a form of communicative social action.

This emphasis on the role of language in verbal social interaction does not entail the extreme view that every use of language must reduce to an instance of communication. This is the straw man that Chomsky attacks in his discussions of the function of language
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(see references cited above). There may well be instances of verbal behavior which are non-communicative, but this in no way undermines the fundamental functionalist tenet that an understanding of language structure requires an understanding of the functions language can serve, communication being the primary one (see Martinet 1964 for some discussion). This position is analogous to claiming that in order to understand the structure of hammers it is necessary to know that they are used primarily for driving nails, even though they may also be employed as doorstops or paperweights or for tapping the ashes out of a pipe. Indeed, it would be difficult to account for the fact that the head of a hammer is always heavy metal and the handle wood or plastic and never vice versa, if one ignores its primary function, since a hammer could easily be a doorstop, paperweight, or pipetapper with a plastic head and a metal handle. Languages are much more complex than hammers, both structurally and functionally, but in both cases one cannot understand form independent of function. It must be noted that this emphasis on communication does not deny or de-emphasize the significance of the native speaker’s ability to use language creatively. Rather, it examines this creativity in terms of the variety of speech activities in which it manifests itself.

We saw clearly in our discussion of formal theories that the definition of language relates directly to the delineation of the proper domain of linguistic inquiry. Since functional theories assume a broader notion of language than formal theories, the scope of linguistic investigation is correspondingly wider. The core areas of linguistic analysis – phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics – are naturally included, but their focus is different. If one is concerned with the role of language in social interaction, then aspects of linguistic structure which serve to signal social as opposed to purely referential meaning share center stage with the purely referential elements, rather than being shunted off into the wastebasket of performance. Sociolinguistic research has shown that social cues can be found in the phonological, morphological, and syntactic systems in a language (see e.g. Gumperz 1971, 1982, Labov 1972, Hymes 1974, Silverstein 1976a, Sankoff 1980), and accordingly, linguists working within this orientation have adopted what we may call the dependency hypothesis, adapted from Duranti (1981): ‘Any aspect of linguistic structure can
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depend upon, interact with or create (some aspect) of social context.15 Thus rather than analyzing linguistic structures in context-independent terms, functional analysis directs its attention to the context-dependent nature of linguistic units.

But this is only half of the story. The study of language in its sociocultural context requires not only an analysis of linguistic forms but also an analysis of speech events, speech activities, and the sociocultural situations that define them. The characterization of speech events such as asserting, asking a question, ordering, promising, and requesting has been attempted by some philosophers of language and linguists working in pragmatics (see e.g. J. Austin 1962, Searle 1969, Cole & Morgan 1975). Ethnographers of speaking have concentrated on describing speech activities in different societies and cultures (see e.g. Gumperz 1971, Gumperz & Hymes 1972, Hymes 1974, Bauman & Sherzer 1974). Up to now this work has been considered to be outside of ‘straight’ or ‘unhyphenated’ linguistics and to be in some sense an addendum to supplement the purely formal work on phonology, morphology, and syntax.6 Within the conception of functionalist linguistic theory we are sketching, such work is directly relevant to linguistic inquiry, and moreover it is important, indeed crucial, for the analysis of these areas of linguistic form because of the dependency hypothesis. Silverstein (1980a) sums up the issue of the scope of analysis:

This functionalism sees the problem of language structure as a reflection of how speech is effectively or ineffectively used in social action, as an instrument for transforming participants’ understanding of specific, socially-defined situations. Thus, if such a theory is to be general, there must be some notion of the recurrence of socially-defined situations, implying, in turn, an analysis of such situations, relevant to linguistic use . . . And there must be a general analysis of formal features of language so as to relate them directly to their uses in context, to explain them by their ‘function’ in context. (1980a:5–6)

Functionalists are concerned with language rather than just grammar, and the goal of understanding human language rather than one particular aspect of it distinguishes them clearly from formalists. This investigation of language includes two particularly important questions, which may appear at first glance to be indistinguishable from those of the formal linguistic theories: