1 Sentence and period

i Sentences now

We shall be considering some obscurities, but also some things so well known that the only difficulty may lie in the need to be explicit, so let us start with one of the latter. In ordinary writing we spell words with letters, we recognize the spelled things as words by separating them with spaces, and we end groups of words with full stops. These practices, none of which is universal, express a particular grammatical attitude towards the written language, centring for us on sentences.

The very ancient practice of word division[1] has already made an essential step towards Western grammar. If words were shown to exist every time something was written down, the study of the behaviour and interaction of words was a natural enough development. Our grammars are principally of different forms of words (accidence) and the rules for the combination of words (syntax).

'Well may men knowe, but if it be a fool, / That every part dirryveth from his hool,' as Chaucer's Duke Theseus declares. It is axiomatic in modern grammar that the wholes from which written words derive are called sentences. Transformational analysis always begins with the big S for sentence as the root of the famous inverted trees. 'The **sentence** is the highest grammatical level in the grammatical hierarchy.'[2] Within

[1] 'The division of writing into words . . . appears to have been customary in the writing of various languages in cuneiform characters. The practice may have reached the classical peoples through Crete, for word-division is clear on the Phaistos-disk, which may be as early as 1700 B.C.' (Wingo, *Latin Punctuation*, p. 14).

[2] N. F. Blake and Jean Moorhead, *Introduction to English Language*, 1993, p. 17. The paragraph is a visual representation of a larger unit of discourse, where our conventions of writing are still, as they have been for about three thousand years, some jumps ahead of the grammarians, for we have neither a syntax of the paragraph nor a proof that such syntax is impossible. The anaphoric use of pronouns to refer back to earlier sentences raises the possibility of a syntactic element in the paragraph. Radulphus Brito discussed this question early in the fourteenth century and came to the conclusion that anaphor and antecedent do form a *constructio*, i.e. are syntactically related. (Cf. Covington, *Syntactic Theory*, p. 116.)

transformational-generative grammar *the sentence* is where we start even before *the language*: a sentence can be made out of two different languages.[3]

The grammar of the sentence is autonomous: the question what makes a sentence well-formed can be answered without invoking nonsyntactic categories.[4] *The sentence* is understood within the system of syntax; if we try to define *sentence* we are unlikely to do better than Dr Levinson:

> the minimal theoretical entity required to account for the formal syntactic relationships found to exist among the constitutent syntactic units of a language. It is the entity which allows coherent statements about the lower-level constituents of the language, identifying a domain within which other units can be specified.[5]

The simpler traditional notion is 'the syntactic domain of a finite verb', which depends on an understanding of *verb* that could only be a reference back to the system: a finite verb is that part of speech whose domain makes a sentence.

Our understanding of the sentence is embodied all the time in writing. Many contemporary linguists think their task is to describe, and never say that one form is better or worse than another, though exceptions are mysteriously made for politically incorrect but well-attested forms. No attempt, however, is made to apply descriptivism to the written language. When complaints are made in the press about standards of literacy, what is usually meant is that spellings are bad and sentences not properly written; and teachers correct spellings and prescribe the grammar of written sentences (if they are able) without any qualms.

Modern punctuation has a variety of rhetorical uses, but one of its tendencies is the clarification of sentence structure. It is sometimes punctuation alone that conveys to a reader the syntactic structure of a sentence, for instance just by the insertion of a question mark or not. M. B. Parkes (the necessity of whose work to mine will appear in frequent citation) discusses copyists' mistakes in punctuation:

[3] E.g.

> it provides a
> moyen d'habiller, pour ainsi dire, notre pensée, de la rendre sensible . . . (Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics*, New York, 1966, p. 47)
>
> An English subject, verb and indefinite article belonging to the object are followed by the complex remainder of the sentence in French.

[4] 'Grammatical definitions of the sentence avoid reference to either semantic factors or to subjective notions and depend on purely formal features,' as Dr Levinson says (*Punctuation*, p. 123).

[5] Levinson, *Punctuation*, p. 123.

Such mistakes become more readily excusable when it is realized that the same grammatical structure can sometimes be pointed in several different ways . . . For example the written statement—George said Paul is an idiot—can be pointed either as—'George', said Paul, 'is an idiot'—or as—George said, 'Paul is an idiot'—.[6]

No, this is not the same grammatical structure pointed two ways, but two quite different syntactic structures, distinguished by punctuation. In the first *Paul* is the subject of *said*, in the second *George*, as is shown by the different placing of inverted commas. There are other possibilities for that string of words: George might be the subject and what George said indirect not direct speech, or it could be ' "George," said Paul, "is————" "An idiot?" '

Sometimes lexical or syntactic differences can be indicated aloud by phrasing, stressing, intonation . . . but not always. The different spellings of homophones specifically differentiate words that sound the same. We can't *say* differences between pairs like pears and pares, which we make and see in writing. Any apostrophe, as a sign of omission, i.e. the written indication of something *not* said, can only be written-grammatical, not a record of sounds. The novelist who 'records' uneducated speech with forms like ''E said 'e would 'eave the 'ole 'ouse hup to 'eaven' is simultaneously conducting a grammatical commentary, for the speaker does not use these apostrophes and does not omit anything, except by the standards of the novelist's standard grammar. 'Brackets were useful,' as Percy Simpson says, 'in making a construction clear to the eye.'[7] Some uses of brackets can have no spoken equivalent; for instance there is no way in the spoken language of distinguishing round, square and pointed brackets.

We need to be clear both about the autonomy of the modern grammar of the sentence and about its limitations.

The development of the grammar of the well-formed sentence is one of the great achievements of linguistics. Great intellectual achievements can, however, notoriously become imperialistic, like Darwinian theory. The grammarians, having conceptualized the sentence, are tempted to think of language as made of nothing but sentences. 'I will consider a *language* to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences' and therefore 'Syntactic investigation of a given language has as its goal the construction of a grammar that can be viewed as a device of some sort for producing the sentences of the language under analysis.'[8] There are,

[6] Parkes, *Pause and Effect*, p. 5 and note.
[7] Simpson, *Shakespearian Punctuation*, p. 91.
[8] Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, The Hague, 1957; repr. 1962, pp. 13, 11.

however, other units in language as well as sentences—verses, for instance. It is not unknown even in prose for conspicuously well-written novels to do without sentences, sometimes for a page at a time like the opening of *Bleak House*, sometimes for shorter periods:

> Awful years—'16, '17, '18, '19—the years when the damage was done. The years when the world lost its real manhood. Not for lack of courage to face death. Plenty of superb courage to face death. But no courage in any man to face his own isolated soul, and abide by its decision. Easier to sacrifice oneself. So much easier![9]

A paragraph without a well-formed sentence: two 'sentences' with temporal clauses; four with infinitives; and one without any verb at all! After such knowledge what forgiveness? These can no doubt be treated one way or another as derived elliptically from well-formed sentences or underlying strings, but with what explanatory force? Johnson told the story that

> I once dined in company with ['Demosthenes' Taylor], and all he said during the whole time was no more than *Richard* . . . Dr Douglas was talking of Dr Zachary Grey, and ascribing to him something that was written by Dr Richard Grey. So, to correct him, Taylor said . . . '*Richard*.'[10]

No doubt ellipsis can also be made to 'explain' this *Richard*, but I repeat my question.

With notes for lectures, the notion of derivation from underlying strings or well-formed sentences is absurd, the point being to use the notes as strings and generate the right sort of well-formed sentence when the occasion requires. Many notes are quite intelligible, though not well-formed sentences, i.e. their syntax, the way of putting words together to make them intelligible, is not that of sentences.

There are in fact many ordinary and grammatical uses of the written language not made of well-formed sentences, for instance timetables, income-tax forms, crosswords (answers usually, clues often) and the game of Scrabble, posters, glossaries, programmes (including most of *The Radio Times*), menus, running titles, title and contents pages and indexes. Dictionary definitions are not written in sentences.

It is common for teachers to object to some nonsyntactic string of words in a student's text with a marginal 'not a sentence!' The objection is not itself made in a well-formed sentence. This, I hope, is not mere class-distinction (*you* must write sentences but *I* in authority needn't): it merely recognizes that though sentences are often required, for instance in the writing of essays, the requirement is not universal for all writing.

[9] D. H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, 1923; repr. 1930, pp. 239–40.
[10] Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 25 April 1778.

As for speech: the radio commentator, as the winning-post, the goal or the knock-out punch is imminent, is unlikely to be using well-formed sentences, though his shouted syntax is quite correct for the occasion:

> Adam Bede from Felix Holt now neck and neck Adam Bede Adam Bede Brother Jacob coming up on the outside but still Adam Bede and now Silas Marner putting on a spurt and Felix Holt overtaking Adam Bede on the fence half a furlong to go Brother Jacob fading Felix Holt now clear of Adam Bede Felix Holt as they pass the post Felix Holt then Adam Bede then Silas Marner and what a day for Mrs Cross her third winner of the afternoon!

In view of the common presupposition, which we shall glance at, that the well-formed sentence will convey information, it may be surprising that some styles developed specifically to convey factual information do not use well-formed sentences. For more than fifty years the BBC has been reporting football results without using finite verbs. The listener knows from the intonation whether the result is a home win, an away win or a draw, but there is nothing that could be called sentence structure. That prominent feature of the external world, the weather, is dealt with in broadcasts that make very little use of sentences. The shipping forecast frequently goes on for several minutes without the use of a finite verb. It is likewise to concentrate the conveyance of information that the human race has long since given up addressing envelopes in well-formed sentences, and the idea of a well-formed sentence as an address for e-mail hardly arises.

TG grammar analyses, with some elegance, the syntax of the well-formed sentence, but that is all it does. Some grammarians, however, still demand that for something to be properly called a sentence it must make sense. The quotation above from Blake and Moorhead's *Introduction to English Language* (1993) continues, 'Grammatical completeness on its own is not enough . . . That it should make sense is another essential feature of a sentence.' This needs unpacking. We do, let's hope, make sense in language, often with the well-formed sentences that are central to modern prose, and the aim of the present work is to throw some light on the kinds of sense well-formed prose sentences may make. But an isolated well-formed sentence, 'the highest grammatical level in the grammatical hierarchy', rarely if ever makes sense, even if it is a combination of proposition with reference. To begin a conversation with 'This is a chair,' even if a chair is there, would be to ask for psychiatric attention. It would be as senseless as the nonsense-sentences grammarians amuse themselves by constructing, 'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously,' and the like (Blake and Moorhead's is 'the wisdom drove the table succulently'). That is what they are: sentences that make no sense,

but still sentences. 'A nonsense sentence' is not a contradiction in terms. The autonomy of the grammar of the sentence was not easily achieved and we should hang on to it.

In practice, though, our understanding of the sentence may still carry quite a load of metaphysical and ideological and stylistic baggage—most of it refurbished in the late seventeenth century from Aristotelian leftovers—about the kinds of sense we expect sentences to make, and the mental ways in which they do it. So it is worth emphasizing that since the syntax of the sentence is autonomous, 'the sentence' implies no extra-linguistic views about the workings of the human mind nor anything about the relations of language with the physical universe. The dictionary definition of the sentence nevertheless begins: 'A series of words in connected speech or writing, forming the grammatically complete expression of a single thought.'[11] Neither 'expression' nor 'single thought' are within the province of TG grammar; the first is psychology and the second logic.

Whether Aristotle originated the notion of the sentence as the expression of a single thought I do not know, but he was certainly the authority who established it in Western tradition. It is amazing to think how much we still live under the shadow of Aristotle! He set the tone of the next two and a half millennia by treating words as signs representing ideas:

> Words spoken are symbols or signs of affections or impressions of the soul; written words are the signs of words spoken. As writing, so also is speech not the same for all races of men. But the mental affections themselves, of which these words are primarily signs [*semeia*], are the same for the whole of mankind, as are also the objects of which those affections are representations or likenesses, images, copies. With these points, however, I dealt in my treatise *peri psyches*.[12]

Words are taken to be signs of conceptions that exist separately from language in the mind.

This is what Locke and Saussure, Aristotelians both, almost identically mean by the arbitrariness of the sign: that words are arbitrarily adopted by languages to signify ideas that precede *any* expression. 'Words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but *the ideas in the mind of him that uses them*,' says Locke. Words came so to be used 'not by any natural connection that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain ideas, for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition,

[11] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 2nd edn, Oxford, 1989. All the definitions I quote have been retained unchanged from the great *New English Dictionary*.

[12] Aristotle, *de Interpretatione* 16a; *The Organon*, transl. Harold P. Cooke, Loeb edn, 1938, p. 115.

whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea.'[13] This confuses the undoubted facts that meanings are not found in nature with sounds attached, and that more or less the same sound will do very different work in different languages, with the belief that meanings are found before any linguistic expression whatever.

But: 'When I think in language,' says Wittgenstein, 'there aren't "meanings" going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions.' I believe that once this is said it is just about self-evident. Lower down the same page Wittgenstein challenges us to 'Say a sentence and think it; say it with understanding.—And now do not say it, and just do what you accompanied it with when you said it with understanding!'[14] It is all too easy to say a sentence without thinking it, but there is no equivalent thinking a sentence without saying it. See this and the whole Saussurean apparatus of signifier and signified, that goes by way of Locke's 'ideas' and the Modistae all the way back to Aristotle, can be discarded. There is no difference (not to mention *différance*) between signifier and signified.

It is not my contention that all thinking takes place in language. There are images and dreams. As I walk away I see the car lights left on: I go back and turn them off without saying to myself 'I left the lights on' or 'I must turn them off' or anything else. If this can be called thinking, the thought is in seeing from a certain point of view and acting accordingly. What I do contend is that when we think in language that's exactly what we do: not think separately then translate the thought into language.

Linguists, however, still habitually think in terms of Saussure's 'speech circuit' which tries to account for the conveyance of a thought from one brain to another.[15] A thought is supposed to arise, complete, before it is *coded* into language, then into sound, 'the coding process from meaning to expression', as Halliday calls the notion,[16] and at the other end decoded from sound into language and then from language back into thought (*The New Grammarians' Funeral*, pp. 74–8). The thoughts, unluckily, are always and only producible in their 'coded'

[13] *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 3, ch. 2, ¶2, ¶1 (which harks back to the notion (below) that ideas are dictated in turn by the nature of the world).

[14] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 107e.

[15] Cf. my review of Roy Harris, *Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein*. The only hint I have come across in recent linguistics that the lesson of Wittgenstein has been learned is Frédéric Nef's essay 'The Question of the *Significatum*: a Problem Raised and Solved', transl. Christian Fournier, in Lia Formigiari, (ed.), *Historical Roots of Linguistic Theories*, Amsterdam, 1995, pp. 185–202. There is much to challenge in this essay, but I agree with the very Wittgensteinian conclusion: 'If the significatum can no longer be viewed as a state of affairs or even as a thought, then the very meaning of the problem vanishes' (p. 197).

[16] M. A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 2nd edn, 1994, p. xiv.

form, and nothing at all changes if one denies their separate existence. How do we know that a thought (in the mind) is complete? As Levinson says, 'There is no independent way of identifying a "thought", whatever that thought may be, except as it is embodied in language . . . The only clue to an incomplete thought is an incomplete sentence.'[17]

Arthur Koestler, not being a card-carrying linguist, innocently made one thing clear that the professionals should have noticed for themselves. He puts at the top of the syntactic diagram not the Chomskyan S for Sentence but I for Idea (*The New Grammarians' Funeral*, p. 32). If one takes *I* to include the joining of ideas in propositions, this constitutes linguistic orthodoxy from Aristotle to Saussure, but *I* for Idea cannot enter syntactic analysis. The connection between *I* and *S* is a line not a fork: which means that from the point of view of the grammarian there is *no difference* between the sentence and the idea. I believe this is true, but linguists are still unwilling to remove the *I* as an unnecessary postulate already included in *S*.

If all that Locke meant by the *ideas* of words were words heard, seen, said to ourselves or imagined, I would not disagree, but that is not all. 'Words, by long and familiar use, as has been said, come to excite in men certain ideas so constantly and readily, that they are apt to suppose a natural connection between them. But that they signify only men's peculiar ideas, and that *by a perfect arbitrary imposition*.'[18] I am following Wittgenstein in arguing not for natural connection between word and idea but for identity. The word properly understood, heard or said to oneself, *is* the idea; one use of the sentence *is* the proposition.

The assumption about sentences commonly associated with the basic belief that they signify mental propositions, and present in the above quotation from Aristotle ('the objects of which those affections are representations'), is that the ideas of which the propositions are made will refer to objects or categories in the external world. According to the 'traditional interpretation of Aristotelian semantics—to be found, e.g., in Boethius, Avicenna, Albert the Great, and Thomas Aquinas,' Jan Pinborg tells us, 'words signify concepts which in turn represent the objects signified.'[19] I quote William Barnes's neat reformulation of ideas more than two thousand years old:

> The formation of language is always a conformation to three things in nature—(1) the beings, actions, and relations of things in the universe; (2) the conceptions of them by the mind of man; and (3) the actions of the organs of speech.[20]

[17] Levinson, *Punctuation*, pp. 121–2.
[18] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 3, ch. 2, ¶8.
[19] Pinborg in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, p. 262.
[20] Quoted in Lucy Baxter, *The Life of William Barnes Poet and Philologist*, 1887, pp. 136–7.

The conceptions of (2) are to be *of* the 'things' of (1); and language has to signify the process. The Wittgensteinian short-cut means that Barnes's item (2), the conception of things by the mind of man, is an entity not found in grammar. (Whether it may be found anywhere else is a question we need not ask.) I think the same about Barnes's item (1), the beings, actions and relations of things in the universe. Grammar has enough on its plate without trying to take in the universe. This is not to deny, as do some deconstructionists,[21] that language can refer. But language does many other things too; and when it does refer the sense made is rarely determined by the referent and only then in the right situation. Some questions like 'Where is the dog?' may be answered more or less simply by references to the external world. If an oddly designed object is in question even 'This is a chair' is possible. But for instance to say 'dog' every time a dog happens to be present would be a pathological symptom rather like the above-mentioned contextless 'This is a chair.'

The reasons why some grammarians still take what Chomsky calls the 'simple declarative sentence' as the norm are not grammatical, but because it (usually the third person indicative) has the prestige of signifying a complete thought by way of *making true statements*. Whether a sentence is making a statement, however, is not decided by its status as a sentence. Some indicative sentences make propositions, some tell stories. The basic subject plus predicate form belongs equally to both; there is no reason grammatical, logical or chronological, to give the propositional uses priority. Outright lies are deplorable but need not be ungrammatical. It may be that, as Milton reports, angels are easily deceived because they expect rational creatures to tell the truth; but this is plainly a moral not a grammatical expectation nor even, as regards humans, realistic.

How to know when something is not meant 'straight'? To parallel the imperative, indicative, subjunctive, optative . . . there is no ironative mood marking tongue-in-cheek. We can 'roguishly accent' an ironical word,[22] but is not the best irony quite deadpan? Earnestness can also be expressed in speech rhythm, but earnestness is commonly meant ironically.

There is no reason *in grammar* for the indicative to have precedence over, for instance, the imperative. Reputable linguists have conjectured that the imperative was the primitive form of the verb in Indo-European. In fact as I shall demonstrate in chapter four, the well-formed sentence

[21] Robinson, 'Reconstruction', p. 183.
[22] Herman Melville, *Bartleby*, repr. 1995, p. 27.

as a central mode of thought came into English by way of the imperative not the indicative.

It can be a moment well spent to remind ourselves, perhaps again with the help of Wittgenstein,[23] that many senses are made in language which can only with some ingenuity be called making statements.[24]

Exclaiming (and the varieties of *that*, as Wittgenstein remarks). *Praying. Commanding*—which even has its well-recognized grammatical mood, the imperative, but which can be done in many ways not using the imperative.[25]

Expressing an attitude or relationship to the subject of the 'proposition'. *Expressing feeling. Expressing doubts, irony, sarcasm.*

Valuing: conferring value upon or seeing value in some object which may or may not be the grammatical subject of a sentence. (Many, perhaps *all*, poems do this one way or another.)

Imagining, by way of enactment and the old Aristotelian *making* and *imitation*.[26]

None of these can be discussed directly by the TG grammarian. Ordinarily, many of them will go on at the same time. Any of them will simultaneously perform a surprising feat I discuss in chapter seven below: suggest a world.

Wittgenstein is the prime philosophical anchor for what I am saying about the identity of language and thought, but as a matter of fact I came to it myself as an ordinary part of a literary education. Pound, Eliot, Richards, Leavis, demonstrated the fallaciousness of the old idea of language as the *dress* of thought, which was merely the aesthetic version of the belief in separable ideas. Poems are notoriously not translatable (as the Venerable Bede says very clearly[27]) not because only the poet's words can express his separable idea but because the poem *is* this ordering of words. The quoted work of Aristotle is commonly

[23] Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, para. 27, p. 13, and many other places.

[24] This is a passing glance at one of the central themes of information technology, hermeneutics and also of epistemology. A meaning laugh or an expletive can be said to convey information, but only if we define *information* so as not to make it propositional.

[25] Cf.'Grandcourt put up his telescope and said, "There 's a plantation of sugar-canes at the foot of that rock: should you like to look?"' (George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ch. LIV). In context this is certainly a command, though grammatically a most polite interrogative subjunctive.

[26] The basic notions of creation and imitation make together, I believe, a necessary paradox, but this is not the moment to discuss it.

[27] Bede apologizes in the (Latin) *Eccesiastical History of the English* for translating the English verses of Cædmon (Book IV, ch. 24; Loeb edn of *Opera Historica*, ed. J. E. King, 1930, vol. II, p. 144).