THE PSYCHOLINGUISTIC PROBLEMS OF SPEECH PRODUCTION

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Annotation: Regular and irregular words have long served as metaphors for the lawabiding and the quirky. Psychology textbooks point to children's errors like breaked and goed as evidence that we are a pattern-loving, exception-hating species, explaining everything from why children have trouble learning simple laws of physics to why adults make errors when using computers or diagnosing diseases. In 1984 George Orwell has the state banning irregular verbs as a sign of its determination to crush the human spirit; in 1989 the writer of a personal ad in the New York Review of Books asked, "Are you an irregular verb?" as a sign of her determination to exalt it.

Key words: regular words, irregular words, folklore, speech production.

Science is not always kind to folklore from the natural world. Elephants do forget, lemmings don't commit mass suicide, two snowflakes can be alike, we use more than 5 percent of our brains, and Eskimos don't have a hundred words for snow. We had better give irregular and regular verbs a closer look before using them as evidence for a language faculty that works by words and rules, or more generally, a mind that works by lookup and computation.

Regular and irregular forms do not work in isolation; they are part of the integrated living system we call a language. This chapter will tease out regular inflection from the linguistic organs and tissues in which it is embedded. The next chapter, on irregular verbs, will have a different feel. Living creatures can be dissected, but creatures dead so long that only a trace of the living organs remain must be excavated. Our tour of the irregular verbs will uncover them from layers of historical sediment laid down over thousands of years.[1]

Does language even have an anatomy? Many people think about language in the following way: We need to communicate, and language is the fulfillment of that need.

[1] Leech G.H "Semantics" London 1974 324p.

For every idea there is a word and vice-versa, and we utter the words in an order that reflects the connections among ideas. If this commonsense view is true, there would be little need to speak of language being a complex system. The complexity would reside in the meanings, and language would reflect that complexity directly.

The point of this chapter is to show that this view is mistaken. I will put regular verbs under a microscope to reveal the delicate anatomy that makes them work. Language does express meaning as sound, of course, but not in a single step. Sentences are put together on an assembly line composed of mental modules, shown on the following page. One is a storehouse of memorized words, the mental lexicon. Another is a team of rules that combine words and parts of words into bigger words, a component called morphology. A third is a team of rules that combine words into phrases and sentences, a component called syntax. The three components pass messages about meaning back and forth with the rest of the mind so that the words correspond to what the speaker wants to say. This interface between language and mind is called semantics. Finally, the assembled words, phrases, and sentences are massaged by a set of rules into a sound pattern that we can pronounce when speaking or extract from the stream of noise when listening. This interface between language and the mouth and ear is called phonology.

Many people are suspicious of box-and-arrow diagrams of the mind. The walls of the boxes and the paths of the arrows often seem arbitrary, and could just as easily have been drawn differently. In the case of language, however, these components pop out as we tease apart the phenomena, and at least some of the divisions are now becoming visible in the living brain.

The easiest boxes to keep separate ought to be the boxes containing words and rules. From the discussion in the preceding chapter, it should be clear that a simple word like duck belongs in the lexicon. Just as clearly, a sentence like Daffy is a duck is assembled by the rule of syntax. According to the words-and-rules theory, irregular forms such as swam are also words that come from the lexicon, because they are as arbitrary as duck. What do we do then with regular forms like quacked? They look like words and sound like words, but I have been insisting they don't have to be stored in the

lexicon. They don't seem like words, but they don't seem like sentences either, which are the clearest products of rules.

The problem is that the terms word and rule come from everyday parlance and are as scientifically fuzzy as other vernacular terms, like bug and tock. On closer examination, the word word has two very different senses.[2] The first sense matches the everyday notion of a word: a stretch of sound that expresses a concept, that is printed as a string of letters between white spaces, and that may be combined with other words to form phrases and sentences. Some of these words are stored whole in the lexicon, like duck and swam; other are assembled out of smaller bits by rules of morphology such as quacked and duck-billed platypus. A technical term for a word in the sense is a morphological object, to be distinguished from phrases and sentenced, which are syntactic objects.

The second sense of word is a stretch of sound that has to be memorized because it cannot be generated by rules. Some memorized chunks are smaller than a word in the first sense, such as prefixes like un- and re- and suffixes like –able and –ed. Others are larger than a word in the first sense, such as idioms, clichés, and collocations. Idioms and phrases whose meanings cannot be computed out of their parts, such as eat your heart out and beat around the bush. Collocations and clichés are strings of words that are remembered as wholes and often used together, such as gone with the wind or like two peas in a pod. People know tens of thousands of these expressions; the linguist Ray Jackendoff refers to them as "the Wheel of Fortune lexicon", after the game show in which contestants guess a familiar expression from a few fragments. A chunk of any size that has to be memorized-prefix, suffix, whole word, idiom, collocation-is the second sense of word. It is the sense of word that contrasts with rule, and the sense I had in mind when choosing the title of this book. A memorized chunk is sometimes called a listeme, that is, an item that has to be memorized as part of a list; one could argue that this book ought to have been called Listemes and Rules.

So walked is a word in the first sense (a morphological object) and not a word in the second sense (a listeme); its listemes are walk and –ed. These one-part listemes-

[2]Nida E. "Componental Analysis of Meaning" Mouton 1975, 273p.

prefixes, suffixes, and the stems they attach to, such as walk-are called morphemes, a term coined by nineteenth-century linguist Baudouin de Courtenay to refer to "that part of a word which is endowed with psychological autonomy and is for the very same reasons not further divisible"

What about the rules? Why divide the rules of morphology, which build complex words (including regular and past-tense forms), from the rules of syntax, which build phrases and sentences? Both are productive, recursive, combinatorial systems, and some linguists see them as two parts of a larger system. Yet all linguists recognize that they are not identical. This may seem of no interest to anyone but a student cramming for Linguistics 101 final, but in fact it has been a source of countless barroom arguments, late-night dorm-room debates, and irreconcilable differences.

What is the correct word for people who pass by: passerbys or passerby? Do nervous fiancées dread the first meeting of the mother-in-laws or the mother-in-law? Who did Richard Nixon force to resign: a series of Attorney Generals, or a series of Attorneys General? Here are a few real-life examples:

Dear Ms. Grammar,

A member of the Friday Night Couples League··· had a hole in one on the third hole and another on the fifth. Did he have two holes in one or two hole in ones? Th.Dreiser's "Jennie Gerhardt".

One of us believes that the pettern should be the same as in attorneys general and passersby. The other disagrees, believing that the holes in one would indicate that the golfer gained multiple holes in one shot. A Diet Coke has been wagered on this, and we have agreed that Ms. Grammar shall be the final authority.[3]

Spoonfuls

From a recipe: "Now throw in two tablespoon full of chopped parsley and cook ten minutes more. The quail ought to be tender by then." Never mind the quail: how are we ever going to get those tablespoons tender? The word, of course, is

[3] Leech G.H "Semantics" London 1974 324p.

tablespoonfuls, no matter how logical it seems. One dictionary contains the entry spoonsful, but this is not generally accepted.

Gin and tonic season (no hyphens, pleas) is just about finished, but Joe Galeota of West Roxbury would still like to know how to order when he's having more than one. "Friends advised me that the answer is 'gins and tonic' because alcohol is the main ingredient." he writes.

Never has the U.S. faced a worse crisis than in 1887, after the invention of the Jack-in-the-Box. It had become a fad overnight, and everyone was having a whale of a time when someone asked, "What is its plural?" "Jack-in-the-Boxes!" claimed some. Other hotly insisted, "Jack-in-the-Box!" Civil war seemed inevitable, when Zeke Kelp's Crusade won a compromise on "Jack-in-the-Boxes."

Unthanked for forty-free years, Kelp will be honored next week when N. Y. City unveils a hydrant in his name.

All right, the last example isn't from real life; it's from the Early Cartoons and Writing of Dr. Seuss. The others are from well-known language columnists. Hole-in-one is from Ms. Grammar, the nom de plume of Barbara Walraff when presiding over "World Court" in the Atlantic Monthly. Spoonful is from Theodore Bernstain, the late New York Times editor who wrote the syndicated column "B on Words." Gin and tonic is from Jan Freeman, who dispenses The Word in the Boston Globe.

People disagree on how to pluralize nouns, and they care about who is correct. Purists that the –s belongs on the noun in the middle of the expression (notaries public, runners-up), and those with the common touch are content to leave it at the end (notary publics, runner-ups). "Ms. Grammar" advised her beseechers that holes in one is technically correct, but added, "to say 'two holees in one' is to ask to be misunderstood." Her Solomonic suggestion was to say a hole in one twice, and to buy two Diet Cokes.

For my purpose-figuring out how the human mind deals with language-there is no correct answer. Most disputes about "correct" usage are questions of custom and authority rather than grammatical logic (see "The Language Mavens" in my book The

Language Instinct), and in these disputes in particular, both parties have grammatical logic on their side. Their agony highlights the distinctions among lexicon, morphology, and syntax, and illustrates the theme of this book that the mind analyzes every stretch of language as some mixture of memorized chunks and rule-governed assemblies. How people pluralize an expression depends on how they tacitly analyze it: as word or as phrase.

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