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The Concept of Unit Structure

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Abstract

This article delves into the intricate concept of unit structure, exploring its foundations through various theoretical perspectives. The author meticulously dissects the underlying principles that govern unit structures, shedding light on the nuanced interplay of ideas and frameworks that contribute to their formation.

Key Words: *element, function, table, leavetaking.*

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The term 'structure' refers to the relationships that exist between the small units that make up a larger unit. For example, the basic components of a table are a flat board and four long thin pieces of wood or metal, but these elements do not constitute a structure until they are related to each other as a horizontal top supported at the corners by four vertical legs. In this way, each 'element' is given its position and its 'function', which together we may call the 'grammar' of all those members of the general class of objects called 'table' [Givón, 2001].

Everything in our lives has structure. A house may be built of bricks, but its structure consists of rooms having different formal, functional and distributional characteristics. Tables, chairs, cars, all objects are composed of functionally related 'formal items'; and the same applies to activities such as speeches, plays, concerts and football matches. It is natural that languages, which are the spoken and written representation of our experience of all these things, are also manifested in structured forms. Linguistic structures are described in terms of the semantic functions of their various elements and the syntactic forms and relationships which express them.

We have seen a brief preview of the main semantic elements of the clause, together with some of the possible configurations produced by the combinations of these elements. Groups, whose function is to express the things, processes, qualities and circumstances of our experience, also have semantic elements and structures. These are different for each

type of group and are treated in the relevant chapter on each of these classes of unit. Here we shall briefly present the syntactic elements of all ranks of unit.

Syntactic elements of clauses. Clauses have the greatest number of syntactic elements or functions of all classes of unit. The criteria for their identification, the syntactic features and the realisations of each are discussed in section 2. Here we simply list and exemplify the clause elements within common clause structures. The type of structure used in order to express a 'situation' or 'state of affairs' depends to a great extent on the verb chosen. In the following sentences we will see components of speech units and their content:

Subject (S) Jupiter is the largest planet. SPCs

Predicator (P) The election campaign has ended SP

Direct Object (Od) Ted has bought a new motorbike. SPOd

Indirect Object (Oi) They sent their friends postcards. SPOiOd

Prepositional Object (Op) You must allow for price increases. SPOp

Subject Complement (Cs) He is powerless to make any changes. SPCs

Object Complement (Co) We consider the situation alarming. SPOdCo

Locative/Goal Complement (Cloc) We flew to Moscow. SPCloc

Circumstantial Adjunct (A) The news reached us on Tuesday. SPOdA

Stance Adjunct (A)

Unfortunately, we could not reach York in time.

ASPOdA

Connective Adjunct (A) However, other friends were present

ASPCs [Downing & Locke, 2006]

It will be seen that for interrogative and negative clauses we use an additional function, the Finite.

Syntactic elements of groups. Nominal groups, adjectival groups and adverbial groups are composed of three primary elements or functions: a head (h) preceded by a pre-modifier (m) and followed by a post-modifier (m). This last element is sometimes called a 'qualifier'. In the chapters devoted to these groups we also distinguish 'complement' (c) as a special type of posthead element. Complements of nouns and adjectives are introduced by a preposition or by a that-clause which is controlled by the head-word of the group. For example, the adjective good controls a complement introduced by at: good at chess. The noun belief controls a that-clause: the belief that he is always right. In the case of nominal groups, we also distinguish between 'modifiers', which describe or classify the head, and 'determiners' (d), which specify it in terms of definiteness, quantity, possessiveness, etc. Thus, we give the determiner and the pre- and post-modifiers equal syntactic status as primary elements of nominal groups. The following are examples of these group structures:

NG: dmhm: those | beautiful | paintings | by Goya

AdjG: mhc: extremely | difficult | to translate

AdvG: mhm: very | carefully | indeed

In Verbal Groups, the lexical verb is regarded as the main element (v), which either functions alone, whether in finite or non-finite form, as in the example Walking along the street, I met a friend of mine, or is preceded by auxiliaries (x), as in will go or has been reading. The first auxiliary (or the auxiliary, if there is only one) is called the 'finite operator' (o). It is the element that contributes information about tense, modality, number and person, and so helps to make the VG finite and fully 'operative'. It is also the element that operates in the syntactic structure to make the clause interrogative and/ or negative, and to make ellipted responses:

Have you been driving for many years? – Yes, I have.

Do you enjoy driving? – Yes, I do.

In the more complex verbal groups, each element is telescoped into the following one:

v: plays

ov: has | played [have + -en]

oxv: will | be | playing [will + [be + -ing]]

oxxv: must | have | been | played [must + [have + -en] [be + -en]]

The lexical verb is sometimes followed by an adverbial particle (symbolised by 'p') as in ring up, break out, take over. Many such combinations form integrated semantic units which are idiomatic [Quirk, Greenbaum, Svartvik, Leech 1985]. Although the particle frequently forms an integral part of the meaning of the lexical verb, and in fact can often be replaced by a simple verb form (ring up = telephone; break out = escape, erupt), transitive combinations can be discontinuous as in I'll ring you up, they've taken it over.

However, most particles are not otherwise moveable; we can't say *Up I'll ring you or *Out broke an epidemic. The only exception is in 'free combinations' where the particle has a directional meaning, and in such cases we classify them as directional complements with special uses: Down came the rain and up went the umbrellas. However, grammars differ in this respect.

In Prepositional Phrases (PP) there are two obligatory elements: the prepositional head (h) and the complement (c). There is also an optional modifier (m), which is typically realised by an adverb of degree (e.g. right, quite). The structure of PPs is illustrated as follows:

mhc: right | across | the road
 quite | out of | practice

Prepositional phrases appear as realisations of many functions are treated in

sections of this chapter, together with prepositional meanings, which are described in terms of locative, metaphorical and abstract uses.

Componence, realisation and function. Any structure can be considered to be composed of elements which form a configuration of 'functions', whether semantic functions such as Agent-Process-Affected or syntactic functions such as the clause configuration Subject-Predicator-Direct Object or the modifier-head-modifier structure of the nominal group. Each of these functions is in turn realised by a unit which is itself, at least potentially, a configuration of functions, and these in turn are realised by others until the final stage is reached and abstract categories such

as subject, head, modifier, etc., are finally realised by the segments of the spoken or written language.

The 'structural tree' diagrams this model of analysis at the three unit ranks of clause, group and word, to illustrate the clause The bus strike will affect many people tomorrow. An important property of language is the fact that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the class of unit and its function. While it is true that certain classes of unit typically realise certain functions, Nominal Groups at Subject and Object functions, for instance, it is nevertheless also true that many classes of unit can fulfil many different functions, and different functions are realised by many different classes of unit. For instance, the NG next time can fulfill the following clause functions, among others:

Subject: Next time will be better.

Adjunct: I'll know better next time.

Direct Object: We'll enjoy next time.
[Downing & Locke, 2006]

The nearest to a one-to-one relationship in the grammar is that between the process

and the verbal group that realises it. This many-to-many relationship is fundamental for understanding the relationship of the grammar of English to discourse. By this it is not implied that discourse (or even a text) is a kind of super-sentence, a grammatical unit that is simply 'larger' than a sentence and with the same kind of relationship holding between its parts as that which holds between grammatical units.

A piece of discourse is quite different in kind from a grammatical unit. Rather than grammatical, it is a

pragmatic-semantic unit of whatever length, spoken or written, and which forms a unified whole, with respect both to its internal properties and to the social context in which it is produced. To take a minimal instance, a pragmatic act such as 'leavetaking' may be realised by a modalised declarative clause (I'll be seeing you) or by the

formulaic expression Goodbye, among others. Typically, a discourse is made up of various types of pragmatic acts, which in turn are realised semantically and syntactically. In this dissertation, although we start from the grammar rather than from the text, the relationship between the two is of primary interest.

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