

Molière as Inventor of Transformational Grammar, or Was It Applied Stylistics ?

There was a time in linguistics in the sixties and the seventies and especially in the United States, when first-generation, second-generation and third-generation students of Noam Chomsky were engaged in serious competition to prove that they had found the true origins of Transformational Generative Grammar [henceforth TGG]. Robin Lakoff, for instance, believed that she found TGG's sources in the Port Royal *Grammaire raisonnée*, and Peter Salus insisted that the medieval *Modistae* were proto-generativists. While there may have been certain minor elements of truth in these findings, our valiant colleagues appear not to have done their homework too well. Maybe the library was too far ; maybe they forgot their high school French, or just never learned to read in the language without too much effort. Whatever the case, the fact remains that Condillac, for instance, was never mentioned despite the fact that he was the first scholar to say that « *chaque langue est un calcul, et chaque calcul est une langue* ». This certainly would have made a brilliant slogan for people enamored with symbolic logic. Yet the love for logic above all prevailed throughout the 43 years of TGG's documented history, during which time practitioners of the creed never came to grips with one essential question : Do transformations really preserve meaning, or not ? If they do, to what extent ? What is gained or lost in denotation and connotation if we express the semantic content of a given sentence as another sentence, related to the original by some alteration either of word order, mode or voice, particularly the active and the passive ?

It is reasonably clear that an English sentence such as

1. « Brutus killed Caesar », and its passive counterpart
2. « Caesar was killed by Brutus »

DENOTE the same set of circumstances. Whichever way the sentence is put, the reader or listener understands that Brutus is the DOER or AGENT, (in fact he may also be called the AGGRESSOR), and Caesar is the GOAL, TARGET, or the VICTIM. It is equally clear the act is one of « killing » and not « embracing » or « kissing » ; as is the fact that the sentences make a statement rather than ask a question. Furthermore that the statements made refer to the past. In other words, an eyewitness of what transpired on the Ides of March in 44 B.C. would not perjure himself in a court of law if he were to state what he says either in the active or in the passive voice.

Classical rhetoric had a simple solution for such cases. It was asserted that the DENOTATION of this active-passive pair is the same — hence the freedom to testify either way — but that they differed in their CONNOTATION. In the active sentence the psychological emphasis is on *Brutus*, as his name is the first word of the sentence. The rest, in a sense, is a COMMENT on what Brutus did. Another way of putting it is that in the active sentence the first word, which is the subject, is THEMATIC. In the passive sentence *Caesar* is the thematic word, and the rest is a comment on what happened to him. The thematic word is fairly easy to recognize. All one has to do is imagine that there is a PAUSE after it, which may be followed by the interjection *come to think of it*, or *actually*. Thus we can have

3. « Brutus, COME TO THINK OF IT, killed Caesar », or
4. « Caesar, COME TO THINK OF IT, was killed by Brutus ».

I propose to call this interjection the SEMANTIC PAUSE, because it allows the speaker or the writer to change his mind in mid-sentence or mid-discourse. A large variety of interjections used as semantic pauses are available in many languages. English offers such forms as *if truth be told*, *if I am not mistaken*, *rumors to the contrary notwithstanding*, and many more. French gives us « *pour dire la vérité* », « *s'il faut avouer la vérité* », « *si je ne me trompe pas* », and many more. The rules of word order in French do not allocate there in quite the same way as in English. Let us try a few of these varieties on an arbitrarily chosen « nonsensical » sentence :

5. « Yesterday I saw a green horse smoking a dozen oranges. **SURELY IT WAS YESTERDAY** that I saw a green horse... It was **CERTAINLY A GREEN HORSE** that I saw yesterday... If truth be told, it was a **GREEN** horse that I saw yesterday... » (Emphasis within emphasis is set in bold face type.)

6. « Hier j'ai vu un cheval vert qui fumait une douzaine d'oranges ». « *JE VOUS DIS QUE...*, *JE VOUS ASSURE QUE...*, *J'INSISTE SUR LE FAIT QUE...*, etc. », « **c'était hier** que j'ai vu un cheval vert qui... etc. », « C'était bien **un cheval vert** que j'ai vu hier qui fumait or (fumant) une douzaine d'oranges. », « C'était bien **une douzaine d'oranges** que le cheval vert que j'ai vu hier vert fumait. », « **C'est fumant** une douzaine d'oranges que j'ai vu un cheval vert hier, etc. ».

A great deal has been written about sentence introducers and disclaimers under the heading of PERFORMATIVES in speech act theory, which arose, curiously enough, in the wake of TGG. No serious linguist paid any theoretical attention to these during the days of the classical linguistics of the 19th century, since everyone took it for granted that the two sentences *I don't have any money* and *I tell you/I am telling you (that) I don't have any money* while « meaning the same », differed in DEGREE OF EMPHASIS. Emphasis, in turn, was regarded more a matter of stylistics and rhetoric, than linguistics proper.

Great indeed is therefore the omission made by the Robin Lakoffs of this world, for they missed the most remarkable demonstration in a major European language of how meaning can remain the same with the connotation shifting between the normal and the exaggerated. Let us turn to Act 2, scene 6 of Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, first performed in 1670 :

MONSIEUR JOURDAIN : Par ma foi ; il y a plus de quarante ans que je dis de la prose sans que j'en susse rien, et je vous suis le plus obligé de monde de m'avoir appris cela. Je voudrais donc lui mettre dans un billet : Belle marquise, vos beaux yeux me font mourir d'amour ; mais je voudrais que cela fût mis d'une manière galante, que cela fût tourné gentiment.

MAÎTRE DE PHILOSOPHIE : Mettre que les feux de ses yeux réduisent votre cœur en cendres ; que vous souffrez nuit et jour pour elle les violences d'un...

MONSIEUR JOURDAIN : Non, non, non ; je ne veux point tout cela. Je ne veux que ce que je vous ai dit : Belle marquise, vos beaux yeux me font mourir d'amour.

MAÎTRE DE PHILOSOPHIE : Il faut bien étendre un peu la chose.

MONSIEUR JOURDAIN : Non, vous dis-je. Je ne veux que ces seules paroles-là dans le billet, mais tournées à la mode, bien arrangées comme il faut. Je vous prie de me dire un peu, pour voir, les diverses manières dont on les peut mettre.

MAÎTRE DE PHILOSOPHIE : On peut les mettre premièrement comme vous avez dit : Belle marquise, vos beaux yeux me font mourir d'amour. Ou bien : D'amour mourir me font, Belle

marquise, vos beaux yeux. Ou bien : Vos yeux beaux d'amour me font, Belle Marquise, mourir.
Ou bien : Mourir vos beaux yeux, belle marquise, d'amour me font. Ou bien : Me font vos beaux
yeux mourir, belle marquise, d'amour.

MONSIEUR JOURDAIN : Mais de toutes ces façons-là, laquelle est la meilleure ?

MAÎTRE DE PHILOSOPHIE : Celle que vous avez dite : Belle marquise, vos beaux yeux me font
mourir d'amour.

MONSIEUR JOURDAIN : Cependant je n'ai point étudié, et j'ai fait cela tout du premier coup. Je
vous remercie de tout mon cœur, et je vous prie de venir demain de bonne heure.

There are several things that are truly outstanding about this passage. It is the normal, unmarked word order that the Master of Philosophy finds the most appealing. Native speakers of modern Parisian French as well as modern Canadians from Québec find all the others a bit odd, indeed « *forcé* ». On the other hand, it is often pointed out that Molière could have gone quite a bit further and added some variations such as « *Ce sont bien vos beaux yeux, belle marquise, qui me font mourir d'amour* » ; « *C'est bien d'amour que vos beaux yeux, belle marquise, me font mourir* » ; or even « *c'est bien vous, belle marquise dont les beaux yeux me font mourir d'amour* », etc. The Master of Philosophy spoke 17th century French and the « *c'est bien... que...* » construction probably enjoyed lesser currency in the rhetorical modes of insistence than it did during the 20th century and does today. If the name of the game had been « let us see all possible variations », Molière could have made the Master of Philosophy point out the possibility of shifting the attention to the experiencer of love, and thus say « *C'est bien moi (or moi-même) qui mourrai (or qui vais mourir) d'amour, belle ;arquise, par vos beaux yeux* », or put the thematic emphasis on the instrument of death, the countess' beautiful eyes, and say « *Ce sont bien vos beaux yeux, Belle Marquise, qui me font mourir d'amour* » with all possible variations depending on where one placed the vocative, *belle marquise*.

It is, in fact, one of the most amazing weaknesses of TGG that no one in the movement itself ever bothered convincingly to calculate the possible number of transformations of a given sentence although I heard it from M. A. K. Halliday, the founder and main figure of Systemic-Functional Grammar (personal communication) that given all the prosodic variations of insistence and double markedness within markedness, the number is astronomical indeed, approaching 10^{22nd} power.

According to the late André Martinet, the leader of French Functionalism, there is no need to generate anything at all, because to do so is an ACT OF PESSIMISM, assuming that the CORPUS IS CLOSED. Indeed if the corpus is closed, then we have reason to make up sentences we have not yet encountered either in print or by word of mouth. Today's newspaper has not appeared yet and tomorrow's poetry has not yet been written. If, on the other hand, we assume the point of view of THE OPTIMIST and believe that the HUMAN LANGUAGE CORPUS IS AN OPEN ONE, we stand a reasonable chance that something we have never seen or heard may eventually show up.

That this is the case is proven periodically by poets and by the industry. Strange bedfellows ? Maybe, but let us not forget that the word « poet » derives from Classical Greek *ποιητης* and means « doer » or « maker ». Thus the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas turned the word « grief » into a time-word. The form « ago », « *depuis* », ought to be ungrammatical after non-time words and should only occur in constructions such as « an hour ago », « a day ago », « a year ago », « a

minute ago », « a century ago », etc. Yet Dylan Thomas created a nonce-form when he wrote « a grief ago », « *depuis un deuil* ». By so doing he invested the word « grief » with the quality of « time », suggesting that griefs, or periods of sorrow return periodically. Readers and English speakers all over the world picked up on this and nowadays it is commonplace to say « a divorce ago », « two marriages ago », « four baptisms ago », and the like. THERE WAS NO RULE TO ALLOW THIS, YET IT HAPPENED, and for those who imitate Dylan Thomas, a new rule has been added to the language : « Take any word denoting an event which may recur more than once and prefix it to *ago* ». Obviously no one imitating Dylan Thomas consciously or unconsciously says this to him-or herself, just as Dylan Thomas himself was probably unaware of what he was doing. Language is not created in sterile laboratories but by the « *Sprachgefühl* » of unconscious masses or by an occasional genius of language, such as an outstanding poet.

I used to major in French language and literature at the University of Budapest under the guidance of Mme Jolán Kelemen, in whose honor this paper is being written. The events of 1956 brought me to the United States, where the great challenge was to learn English. English, in turn, has a tendency to drive out of one's memory related languages such as German, French, Spanish, Italian, etc. Nevertheless, when I have a chance, I practice my French with my Canadian friends and the numerous French visitors who come to Chicago. Among these were the Professors André and Jeanne Martinet, one of France's outstanding academic couples.

The occasion was the collaboration agreement between the Martinet's SILF (Société internationale de linguistique fonctionnelle) and LACUS/ALCÉU (Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States, or Association de linguistique du Canada et des États-Unis). As Founder-Director of the latter, it was my pleasure and my task to host André and Jeanne in Chicago. It is common knowledge that most French people are impatient with foreigners and tend to correct them when they make a mistake. André and Jeanne Martinet, however, were the shining exception to this old rule. SILF had many members from Greece, Italy, Spain and England, and the Martinets were a couple with an excellent command of English. They thus encouraged me, too, to go ahead and say anything in French that came to my mind. We were sitting on the shore of Lake Michigan eating sandwiches. They insisted that I have more, but I was full, and so I came to blurt out : « *Je me suis tellement encochonné, je ne peux manger plus.* » (« I'm all pigged out, can't eat more ».) The reaction was a hearty laughter from both of them. They looked at one another while André said : « *encochonné... c'est pas mal... D'où vient ça ?* » I blushed and admitted that I never heard it before. After some thinking I surmised that « *un petit-bourgeois endimanché* » must have been on my mind unconsciously. (The original French means « a low middle class person », all « Sundayed up », i.e., lazy and satiated.) They both agreed.

That same afternoon they inquired about the character of a colleague. I must have been getting bold, because out of thin air I produced the sentence « *c'est un type assez merdâtre* ». (« He is a rather shitty character ».) Then I caught myself and blushed, apologizing. The response : More laughter from two famous Parisian linguists ! Embarrassed, I asked : « *Est-ce qu'on peut dire ça ?* » André replied : « *Enfin, la merde, n'a-t-elle pas une couleur aussi ?* » (« Well, doesn't shit have a color ? ») The point, of course, was that I did to « *merde* » what Dylan Thomas had done to « grief » : I had turned a non-color word into a color one, as the

suffix « -âtre » occurs after color words, as in « *blanchâtre* », « *jaunâtre* », « *verdâtre* », « whitsih », « yellowish », « greenish ».

I cannot claim to have invented lasting or worthwhile neologisms in French, but as a professional linguist trained in self-observation as well as in the observation of others, I now see quite clearly what happens when people come out with something that was not heard before : they do not follow any « rules » explicit or implicit, rather they act instinctively, motivated by some ANALOGY, which they are usually not aware of when the innovation itself takes place.

In closing I wish to venture a guess for the future of linguistics. It has to do with the ever-increasing availability of the personal computer, which can nowadays have as much as 60 gigabytes of memory. The early computers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where Noam Chomsky invented TGG in 1957 and 1965 respectively, were as large as a classroom and had relatively little storage capacity. It stands to reason to think that if a computer has a severely limited memory, it must have a relatively small lexicon, since all the memory it has is taken up by the syntax. Consequently, sentences were derived from one another via complicated sets of « transformations ». What I believe will happen in the future is that more and more sentence-types will become LEXICALIZED, no matter how long, somewhat as follows :

1. AGENT/DOER = a
2. ACTION = b
3. TARGET/GOAL = c
4. TENSE = d
5. MODE = e
6. THEME = f

The two sentences at the beginning of this paper, *Brutus killed Caesar* and *Caesar was killed by Brutus*, can be entered into the computer as PROPOSITIONS which are NEUTRAL as to the active-passive distinction, articles, etc., with the action verbs listed under *b*. The stored, lexical sentence-skeletons would say *a VERBed c*, or *c was VERBed by a*, depending on whether *a* or *c* was chosen as the thematic element. Depending entirely on the lexical base, the propositions can be realized in thousands of ways including « John hit Bill », « Bill was hit by John » ; « The elephant trampled the bush », « The bush was trampled by the elephant » ; « The cat chased the mouse », « The mouse was chased by the cat », etc. *ad nauseam*.

Such abstract sentence-skeletons are not « deep structures » or « transformations », but pre-manufactured schemata, which the language user fills with the suitable and available lexis, as dictated by the context of the situation in the sense of Malinowski, J. R. Firth, M. A. K. Halliday and others who base their linguistic theorizing on SEMIOTICS, instead of SYMBOLIC LOGIC and artificial MUTATION RULES.

What children learn are not rules and symbolic logic, but schemata and analogies. The computational linguistics of the 21st century will surely recognize this and correct the sad state of affairs, which can be characterized by the ingenious insight of a Hungarian journalist, György Egri, who said to me once in Toronto, Canada : « The trouble of linguistics is that it

became computerized before the computer». What Molière could have done with the marquise's beautiful eyes, had he only had a computer at his fingertips !

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