Can the Ethiopian Change His Skin?

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Can the Ethiopian Change His Skin?

by

Isao Ishino

Grammar and Glamour;
What a difference there is between the two!
What a similarity there is between the two
—to me at least!

—Isao Ishino

Can the Ethiopian change his skin?

This is not an ordinary rhetorical question implying a negative answer, but a particular question requiring an affirmative answer. Why I have chosen this strange title for this essay will become clear and evident, if the patient reader works his way through his desultory essay.

Recently a certain well-known publishing company devoted to the publication of books on English has published a series of booklets on English grammar.

The advertisement for this series roughly reads as follows:

The chief editor of this series has long been interested in the inner workings of the human mind. We have published this series at his helpful suggestion; the writer of each booklet contained in this series has done his utmost under his strict guidance and supervision to explicate how human mental facts are to be expressed grammatically. This way of treating linguistic phenomena is entirely novel and new.

‘English in Advertising’ is characterized by bombast, magniloquence, and exaggeration, but this advertisement is an invaluable exception, being full of moderate and courteous expressions. However, one expression strikes me as odd and curious. ‘Entirely novel and new’ is an entirely misplaced expression; as long ago as 1933 Jaspersen, much beloved of our grammarians, already made a Notional Survey of Time-Expressions in his Essentials of English Grammar. And there is no slightest doubt that the publication of this series has been largely inspired by ‘Transformational Grammar’, which is now enjoying a temporary vogue among our curiosity-seekers and novelty-mongers. There is nothing new under the sun.

This chief editor, a Japanese authority on English grammar, produces books on English one after another like a professional conjurer on the stage.

Unless he be a superman, this trick of writing, editing, and producing will be utterly impossible—and he is a man, only flesh and blood, and at best a constituent of Homo sapiens.

There is, therefore, every likelihood of his being a ‘dummy’. This authority was once an inveterate formalist and a confirmed Jespersenian. He fought bitterly against introducing the periphrastic forms of the subjunctive mood into his System
of English Grammar, although he made no scruple to admit the Future Tense, which is made up of a combination of ‘will’ or ‘shall’ and the basic form of the verb, into his System.

By discarding almost all its inflectional endings Modern English has practically become an analytical language. This grammarian has failed to notice this all too obvious fact. In building up his System of English Grammar, a grammarian must naturally take the analytical nature of Modern English into consideration.

This authority has suddenly transformed himself into a transformational grammarian of a kind.

What a metamorphosis!

This no wonder, however, if one sees the Unsystem of his English Grammar, which is an admixture of motley and heterogeneous systems.

So far, the name of this grammarian has remained unknown and mysterious. Surely, his name is not Peter, for he builted his system not on a solid rock, but on shift and treacherous sands. For the identification of this nameless authority I appeal to the intuition of the sagacious reader.

This grammarian says that there is no distinction in function between the active and the passive form of the infinitive; but there is a fine distinction between them, and the distinction is sometimes grave and serious.

Compare the following sentences:
There is nothing to be seen in the city.
There is nothing to see in the city.

The following examples in which the infinitive form implies the notion of ‘duty’ or ‘obligation’ are a mere fraction of what I have gathered:

A point to notice is that in some of the expressions there can be detected a nautical influence.

—Foster, The Changing English Language

Sir Linton Andrews had something to say about certain Americanisms.

—ibidem

Logically there is nothing to choose between the singular or plural verb with ‘none’.—ibidem

The point to keep in mind is simply this.—Jacobs and Rosenbaum, English Transformational Grammar

There are two facts to keep in mind regarding verb phrase complements.

—ibidem

Gobbledygook is something to wonder at and admire, but it is not catching.

—Pei, Language Today

I adore and admire Jespersen for his profound scholarship and for his elaborate treatment of the syntax of Modern English; therefore I criticize him freely and frankly. This may sound paradoxical enough, but it is a truth that careful reading leads to critical reading, which leads to incisive criticism.

In Part V of his A Modern English Grammar, Jespersen puts the absurd question to his reader:
If to fear is considered = ‘to be feared’, in “there is nothing (= we have nothing) to
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fear”, what then about the synonymous expression “to be afraid of”? What is the passive of be afraid?

This is a question to which there is no answer: afraid is virtually an adjective in Modern English, whatever its origin was.

In reply to this question, I would ask him what the passive form of the following sentence is:

I am very much aware of them and dislike them.

—Foster, The Changing English Language

Gone are the days when form-ridden grammarians held sway over the grammatical world; the glory that was formalists’ has faded into obscurity and is doomed to fall into oblivion.

By the way, Rosenbaum, author of The Grammar of English Complement Constructions, vehemently rebukes Jespersen for the latter’s abuse and ill-treatment of ‘Nexus’, who makes his appearance whenever grammatically knotty points arise. He had better see Part V of A Modern English Grammar; he will find that this Jack-of-all-trades ceases to be an officious busybody. In his turn, Rosenbaum employs ‘it’, ‘for’, and ‘to’ in place of ‘Nexus’ and uses them freely in his analysis of a sentence.

For instance, according to Rosenbaum, the derivation of the sentence

everyone would prefer you to come early

might be as follows:

First Cycle—no operations

everyone would prefer [[it] [[you] [come early]] ] BASE

N NP VP S NP

Second Cycle

everyone would prefer [[it] [for [you] [to come early]] ] TCP

N NP VP S NP

everyone would prefer [[it] [[you] [to come early]] ] TOCD

NP VP S NP

everyone would prefer [[[you] [to come early]] ] TPD

NP VP S NP

TCP<Complementizer Placement Transformation

TOCD<Optional Complementizer Deletion Transformation

TPD<Pronoun Deletion Transformation.

Since Syntactic Structures was first published in 1957, transformational grammar has undergone many modifications and alterations, and the book is now outdated and outmoded, and antique and antiquated: the book is now a kind of curio.

Chomsky, author of Syntactic Structures, pointed out that the following sentence was grammatical:

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

However, he has later created and developed the notion of “degree of grammaticality”, and in his Aspects of the Theory of Syntax he says:

‘John found sad’ is less grammatical than ‘Colorless green ideas sleep furiously’, which is less grammatical than ‘Revolutionary new ideas appear infrequently’, which
is a perfectly grammatical sentence. Thus, Chomsky has proved himself to be a frail and fickle generative or transformational grammarian.

Chomsky makes the following statement in *Syntactic Structures*:

We have such sentences as

(96) all the people in the lab considered John a fool

(97) John is considered a fool by all the people in the lab.

In §7.4, we saw that (96) is formed by the transformation $T_{bp}$ from the underlying string (98) all the people in the lab --- consider a fool --- John ($NP$ --- $Verb$ --- $NP$?) with the $Verb$ "consider a fool" being an instance of (91). We also saw that the passive transformation applies directly to (98). If the passive interchanges subject and object, it will correctly form (97) from (98) as the passive of (96).

Clearly Chomsky has invented this device to make the passive transformation easy, mathematical, and mechanical, and he has created *Verbs* of a rare kind.

In *Topics in the Theory of Generative Grammar* Chomsky analyzes the sentence

I expect the man who quit work to be fired

in the following way:

When I saw this tree-diagram, I felt as if I were a traveller who had wandered into the labyrinth and was struggling to find his way out. There is nothing generative in this analysis. This is an anatomy of a living sentence, leaving its mere skeleton behind. And the result is the substitution of English words for mathematical symbols. Thus, Chomsky’s grammar is really a kind of anatomical grammar, and I exclaimed ‘Woe betide generative grammar!’

Jacobs and Rosenbaum clarified their position in *English Transformational Grammar*
by pointing out that Chomsky’s ‘colorless green ideas sleep furiously’ was grammatically well-formed, but semantically ill-formed. Therefore, the following strings were, according to them, grammatical sentences:

- the snowbound platypus gobbled a mentholated cigarette
- this electric typewriter makes bilious carbon copies
- my twelve cockroaches chase his testy snails
- the snowbound platypus makes bilious carbon copies
- the snowbound platypus chases his testy snails
- my twelve cockroaches make bilious carbon copies
- my twelve cockroaches gobbled a mentholated cigarette.

However, their notion of grammaticality became vaguer and more vague, until it became an ill-defined, ambiguous notion. And finally semantically ill-formed sentences became synonymous with grammatically ill-formed sentences.

Thus, the following strings were degraded into ungrammatical sentences by the breaking of selectional rules:

- Eliot refused consternation
- hopelessness refused the offer
- the offer was refused by hopelessness
- the rock rolled off the table ingeniously
- the truth has consternation.

Thus, Jacobs and Rosenbaum have fallen into the very pit Chomsky fell into.

‘Care killed the cat’ is appallingly absurd. ‘The sun rises in the east and sets in the west’ is scientifically inaccurate. ‘I write a letter’ is practically impossible. And in ‘It wakened up the listener who has been comfortably nodding agreement all the while’ (Foster, The Changing English Language) ‘nod’ knows not why it can express agreement. Are these sentences all ungrammatical since they are (in my opinion) semantically ill-formed? After all, Chomsky, Jacobs, and Rosenbaum are fellow-travellers in the same boat.

Experts in English selected from various circles once held a conference for the sacred purpose of determining the grammaticality of certain dubious expressions, but they never came to a complete agreement, and the conference ended in a failure. This fact serves as an eloquent testimony to the unsteadiness and inconstancy of grammaticality.

Grammaticality is, thus, fickle and whimsical, and varies from person to person. When one is asked about the grammaticality of a ‘suspect’, all that one has to do is to offer a woman’s reason: one has only to reply that it is grammatical since it is grammatical to one.

It is interesting to note here that the notion of grammaticality of one and the same transformational grammarian varies from occasion to occasion:

This test is not very sophisticated, however.—*English Transformational Grammar*

The deep structure of the second sentence, in a much oversimplified form, is:

—ibidem

And knowledge of these matters is very limited at present.—P postal, *Epilogue*
Prescriptive grammar is thus not very much concerned with the nature of language as such.—Postal, Epilogue

That the notion of grammaticality varies with the region is amply proved by the remarks made by the authors of English Transformational Grammar:

It is interesting in this respect that dialects survive to this day where this transformation which deletes "for" before "to" does not exist. In such dialects, sentences such as

\begin{itemize}
  \item[I want for to go]
  \item[are completely grammatical.]
\end{itemize}

Thus, the consummation, which is not so devoutly wished, is that 'intuition' acts as presiding judge and decides the grammaticality of certain dubious expressions.

The deep structure is a sine qua non to transformational grammarians, who assert that the ambiguity of the surface structure is traceable to the ambiguity of the deep structure. The string 'the shooting of hunters' is ambiguous since it has two different deep structures corresponding respectively to

\begin{itemize}
  \item[the hunters shoot something]
  \item[and]
  \item[someone shoots the hunters.]
\end{itemize}

We traditionalists have no need to evoke the latent, dormant deep structure to explain the ambiguity of the surface structure; to us traditionalists, a knowledge of two functions of 'of' is enough to explain the ambiguity.

The question of the ambiguity of 'He is a poor scholar' can be admirably settled by two meanings of 'poor' without the aid and assistance of the deep structure: 'poor' in one case means "deficient in aptitude or ability", and in the other case it signifies "having little or nothing in the way of wealth, goods, or means of subsistence".

Transformational grammarians are inclined to throw the surface structure to the dogs as a superficial nuisance, which is to them a hindrance to the correct interpretation of a sentence or a phrase. To us traditionalists, the surface is all-important, however.

The surface is where man's infinite potentialities are brought into full play. The surface is where man's true creativity can find its most vigorous and vivid expression. The surface is where one can convey one's thoughts, feelings, and ideas to others most effectually and effectively.

The passive transformation is a favourite with transformational grammarians. This transformation is, however, embarrassing, cumbersome, and hard to deal with. The way of the active sentence to the passive sentence is often hard, and not so smooth as they believe.

What is the active sentence corresponding to each of the following passive sentences?

Mr Brophy must not have been interested in American popular song.—Foster, The Changing English Language

I was very much surprised, of course.—Christie, Parker Pyne Investigates

We must be satisfied, at present, that such analyses are, at the very least,
consistent with the more or less established linguistic principles.—Jacobs and Rosenbaum, *English Transformational Grammar*

They are convinced that they are suffering from delusions.—Christie, *The Mystery of the Blue Jar*

Horwill had been surprised to observe the American use of *in, with* after *belong.*—Foster, *The Changing English Language*

We are not directly concerned with the effect of English or foreign languages.—ibidem

They are rightly alarmed when they ultimately realize that they have thereby lost their identity.—ibidem

But in the present context we are interested chiefly in those German-Americans.—ibidem

The active sentence corresponding to each of the following passive sentences is ambiguous; probably my perverse turn of mind and my superficial knowledge of English grammar are responsible for this assertion: This claim is substantiated by the relative clause version.—*English Transformational Grammar*

The phrase structure possibilities for noun phrases discussed in this chapter are summarized by the following rule.—ibidem

This rule can be abbreviated by convention as S-NP AUX VP.—ibidem

This intuition is confirmed by the ungrammaticality of the following string.—ibidem

This one was reinforced in the thirties by a popular song.—Foster, *The Changing English Language*

The minor inconsistency between *‘into’* and *‘on to’* has been resolved in the U.S.A. by the creation of *‘onto’.*—ibidem

The unevenness of the pattern is ‘rectified’ by the abolition of the offending word.—ibidem

‘The cat was killed by care’ is more natural to me than ‘Care killed the cat’, though both sentences are semantically ill-formed, and ‘He was killed in the war’ seems more natural and basic than ‘Someone killed him in the war’.

To attempt to seek out a vague, hidden subject is a mere waste of time and effort. It is an attempt which ought to be made by a computer or a computerized brain. It is an attempt unworthy of human beings, whose days are numbered. The passive sentence stands on its own bottom, and is never a parasite on an active sentence.

Every transformational grammarian has a decided disposition to assume that ‘a new idea’ is a transform of ‘The idea is new’. If this transformation is carried out mechanically, the matter will be simple, easy, and straightforward, and it will be a blessing for transformational grammarians. However, a host of exceptions block up the way to the formulation of this ‘rule’.

The structural linguist and the transformational grammarian assume that it is their business to describe.—Jack E. Conner, *A Grammar of Standard English*

Thus the generative grammarian, like the structural grammarian, views sentence structure as a hierarchy.—Nilsen, *What’s Happened to Grammar?*

The traditional grammarians never lost sight of the fact that they were studying
a living language.—Conner, *A Grammar of Standard English*

In their absorption with individual words many linguistic historians tend to overlook phrases.—Brian Foster, *The Changing English Language*

Britain is not ready to jump on the bandwagon of Brazilian development.—ibidem

A sort of sloth makes us clutch at a foreign solution for our linguistic problems.—ibidem

In his presidential address to the Bradford English Society the editor of the Yorkshire Post, Sir Linton.—ibidem

I visited my suspect on a reportorial pretext.—Queen, *The African Traveller*

Colloquially, *in the red* was to be heard in Britain from the middle nineteen-forties.—Foster, *The Changing English Language*

In British usage *all in all* was current in a small way by the early thirties.—ibidem

It was perfectly incredible that she should not have heard that agonized appeal for help.—Christie, *The Mystery of the Blue Jar*

Mr. Parker Pyne waved an impressive hand.—Christie, *Parker Pyne Investigates*

Her bewildered gaze fell on him.—ibidem

These borrowings take place on the unconscious plane.—Foster, *The Changing English Language*

They say that exceptions confirm the rule, but too many exceptions are fatal to rule-makers.

I am afraid I have committed a sin of blasphemy. Perhaps I have offended.

However, all men are fallible—the Pope not excepted.

To err is human,

To forgive is the divine task—of authoritative grammarians.