

ENGLISH SUPRASENTENTIALS

The teacher of English language, whether he be a teacher of English to mother-tongue speakers of English or to speakers of other languages, requires of the linguist an accurate and consistent description of the English language; a description which he may use as the basis for the selection and ordering of his language teaching material. This paper takes the form of some questions asked of linguists by an English language teacher who considers current grammatical descriptions of the way in which English sentences may be linked to form units of language larger than the single utterance inadequate for his teaching purposes. Such links will be called suprasententials.

Suprasententials are words or constructions which, though formally occurring within an utterance, relate that utterance as a whole to preceding and/or subsequent utterances to form a unit of language larger than the single utterance. They function grammatically outside the structure of the utterance in which they occur in that their ties both in form and meaning relate to the multi-utterance unit and not to the single utterance unit within which they formally occur

(1) John didn't tell the man that story on Thursday.

(2) Moreover, he couldn't possibly have told him.

(3) It was unknown to John then.

Moreover in (2), although it occurs between the capital letter and the full stop in (2) ties not with the remainder of (2) but with the three units acting as one unit. There are of course other sequence signals within these utterances, (the pronominals he, him and it, the tense sequence in (1) and (2)) but these have grammatical ties within the utterances in which they occur.

We may see this distinction more clearly if we expand (2) to become:

(4) Moreover, at that time, he couldn't possibly have told him.

In (4) the phrase at that time certainly has links with on Thursday in (1) and then in (3) but it also relates grammatically to the remainder of the utterance 'he couldn't possibly have told him' functioning as a sentence adverbial being able to shift around that unit.

Suprasententials, if defined as above, will include several words and constructions which cut across currently existing categories of identification. What language teachers need is a systematic description of both the 'positional' and semantic behaviour of all those words and constructions which function in a grammar of 'larger than sentence' units of language.

Fries\* provides some useful examples of ways in which English sentences may be sequenced in multiple-utterance units. But his analysis, inhibited by the word class framework, does not provide a sufficiently clear distinction between the different types of sentence linkers and how they function grammatically in relation to each other. It is not sufficient to identify the following as "some so-called 'conjunctions' as sequence-signals,"\*\*

e.g., yet, similarly, besides,  
for each of these (apart from any semantic distinction) functions differently from the others in sentences in which it may occur.

For example:

- (1) I liked Mary.
- (2) (yet I took an instant dislike to Jean.
- (3) (and I liked Jean.

We can say:

---

\* Fries, C.C. The Structure of English. London: Longmans Green 1957. Ch. XI

\*\* ibid p.250

(4) I liked Mary yet I took an instant dislike to Jean.

(5) I liked Mary and I liked Jean.

but:

(1) I liked Mary.

(6) (Conversely, I took an instant dislike to Jean.

(7) (Similarly, I liked Jean.

"and" and "yet" pattern in similar ways as sentence linkers and so do "conversely" and "similarly" but the two groups have obvious differences of patterning in the following:

(i) in grammatical variety: the former can function as linkers in single compound sentences whereas the latter cannot.

(ii) in spoken form: the former function as part of a single intonation contour with the remainder of their sentence whereas the latter feature an exclusive intonation contour followed by a distinct pause which separates them from the remainder of the sentence.

(iii) in written form: the latter are usually separated from the remainder of their sentence by a comma whereas a comma is not usually placed after the former (except for specific stylistic reasons). In written form, where sentence linkers such as and, yet, or, nor do occur in single sentences a comma frequently occurs before not after them.

(8) She is an obstinate girl, yet I can't help admiring her.

To systematically order the language progression in an English course and to group similarly patterning examples of any category within that progression, the English language teacher must have a more specific classification of sentence linkers if he is to exploit similarity of patterning as a teaching device.

Nelson Francis in his "The Structure of American English" gives scant recognition to sentence linkers. Despite the fact that he classifies sentence linkers as sentence modifiers (and thereby fails to

make the essential distinction between those grammatical units which have ties both within and without the sentence and those units which have ties only with the multi-sentence unit) he does list seven words of which he says that they "are properly kept separate from the first group, since their only function is to link sentences."<sup>\*</sup>

What appear to be the most satisfactory descriptions of sentence linkers so far published are the accounts by Allen<sup>\*\*</sup> and Knapp<sup>\*\*\*</sup> using the technique of grammatical analysis known as Sector Analysis. Allen's 'spectrum of positions' within which a variety of constructions may occur in the English sentence includes a position for sentence-linkers as distinct from sentence adverbials. This position is indicated within Allen's spectrum as occurring between the position for greetings, hesitation signals etc. and that for sentence adverbials occurring at the front of the sentence, thus:

Y	L	F	T
	Sentence linker	Front Adverbial	Trunk

(9) Yes, but when we get there) we'll have to change.

However, Allen's system does not perhaps adequately account for the shiftability of sentence linkers (as opposed to his 'Rovers'). His spectrum of positions contains a number of 'shiftable' positions but none for shiftable sentence linkers.

Knapp's account of sentence linkers uses Allen's system to describe the behaviour of certain words and constructions acting as sentence linkers in multi-sentence units of written English, primarily the paragraph. However, it would seem that Knapp's account does not examine the essentially suprasentential nature of sentence linkers. Nor does it sufficiently describe the possible range of constructions which may occur in this position, from single words, like consequently etc. to complex included clauses as in the following:

<sup>\*</sup> Nelson W. Francis, The Structure of American English, New York: Ronald Press, 1958, p.417.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Robert L. Allen, "English Grammars and English Grammar," New York: McMillan, 1964 (Mim.), p.40.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Donald S. Knapp, "Formal Factors Affecting Paragraph Division in Expository Writing," Unpubl. diss., Columbia University, New York, 1967, pp. 50-75.

(10) While there may not be any reasonable solution to this, until Sunday you will carry out the orders that have been given.

We language teachers ask of the English grammarian an analysis of the way in which the sentence linker "while . . . . this" differs from the sentence adverbial "until Sunday". If we are to teach students to write linked multi-sentence units, we need a comprehensive description of the sentence linker position and of the words and constructions which may occur in this position. We need a description which is based on the recognition of the grammatical function of this unit as suprasentential.