



"Mais un soir, Elvira alla au Bal"

Book Reviews

James L. Morgan.
FROM SIMPLE INPUT TO COMPLEX GRAMMAR.
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987.
223 pp. \$25.00 (U.S.)

There is a growing literature in what is called learnability theory, a mathematical theory that takes its origin from the work of E.M. Gold (1967). James L. Morgan's book on the learning of syntax by children is an interesting addition to this line of work. The longest chapter is the third which seeks to establish that children could not learn their mother tongue unless the grouping of words into phrases is somehow indicated to them. The first half of the book is devoted to this thesis and the argument is technical and important. Readers should not fight shy of the technical. To attempt to understand language learning without adequate syntactic and logical tools is like trying to dig a hole with one's bare hands.

Even without technical arguments, however, it is obvious that children must discover which words go together to make a phrase if they are ever to fix the grammatical categories of phrases and thus learn the syntax of their language. Just imagine the muddle they would soon get into, if they bracketed (1) as (2) and not as (3).

- (1) The old man eats the apple
- (2) (The old) (man eats the) (apple)
- (3) (The old man) (eats) (the apple)

But how do children manage to bracket correctly?

The second half of the book is a long and interesting set of empirical observations all aimed at indicating the role of phonological cues. The cues

investigated include vowel lengthening at the end of phrases and such intonational markers as pauses. I must confess that I found the evidence more persuasive than I had anticipated, both on the side that such indications of phrase boundaries exist in speech addressed to young children and that at least older language learners are sensitive to the cues. The research is, of course, fragmentary and the author is quite honest about the gaps.

Morgan has done good work by insisting on the role of phonological cues, but, in my view, his case has a somewhat parochial character. In highly inflected languages the words that go together need not be side by side. Even in English it is easy to illustrate the phenomenon I have in mind.

(4) Put the dog out

Here **put** and **out** go together but they are not side by side; so it is not easy to see that their relatedness can be signalled phonologically. Such gaps are far more common in other languages. Another problem is that pauses often occur in normal speech after the word **the**, while the speaker is searching for the correct adjective or noun. So, many pauses do not occur between boundaries.

Another possibility is that morphology, marking agreement in number and gender, might reveal what words go together. Morgan adverts to this but does not pursue it. One problem that would emerge is that morphology would sometimes suggest the wrong grouping. In some languages the verb must agree in number and (in certain circumstances) in gender with the subject noun and not with the object noun. For example, in (1) the verb is singular because **man** is singular. If we replace **man** with **men** in (1) we must make the verb plural. Whether **apple** is singular or plural makes no difference to the verb. This would seem to group subject and verb together, whereas linguistic theory groups verb and object together.

Another possibility that Morgan mentions but downplays is that the meanings of the words might reveal to the child which words are most closely grouped together. Suppose the child knows the meanings of **man** and **old** and has discovered the semantic force of **the**, then he might know that the words **the old man** in (1) go together as **the** and **old** on their own do not. This is a line of thought that is pursued in Pinker (1984) and in more detail in Macnamara (1986). Moreover, if the child knows what **eat** means he must surely know that some creature did the eating and something was eaten and granted certain other suppositions about the nature of the child's conceptualizations (spelt out in Macnamara, 1986), the child would be on the look out for nouns to specify those roles. This is the central idea in Jackendoff (1983). This holds for negative sentences with **eat**; there the child will still be on the look out for nouns indicating who did not eat and what was not eaten. To my mind it seems pretty clear that the child's conceptual capacities play a much larger role than Morgan allows them.

All this is not to deny that phonology plays a significant role in the learning of syntax; or that Morgan deserves great credit for underlining its importance in a penetrating series of studies. It's the exclusiveness that makes me uneasy. The theory of language learning is a more delicate balancing act that Morgan suggests. Be that as it may, though, this is a fine new book which I recommend heartily to all who are interested in language learning.

John Macnamara
McGill University

REFERENCES

- Gold, E.M. (1967). Language identification in the limit. *Information and Control*, 16, 447-474.
- Jackendoff, R. (1983). *Semantics and cognition*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Macnamara, J. (1986). *A border dispute: The place of logic in psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Bradford/MIT Press.
- Pinker, S. (1984). *Language learnability and language development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Edgar B. Gumbert (Editor).

IN THE NATION'S IMAGE: CIVIC EDUCATION IN JAPAN, THE SOVIET UNION, THE UNITED STATES, FRANCE AND BRITAIN.

Atlanta, GA: Centre for Cross-Cultural Education, 1987.

120 pp.

How do the world's leading nations prepare their youth for the responsibilities of citizenship? Five authors, one for each country, examine the situation.

The book will jolt those latter-day "global villagers" who maintain that the world is getting smaller and the differences among peoples and nations less pronounced. *In the Nation's Image* is a sober reminder that despite growing economic interdependence and improved communication, countries are still worlds apart in the important domain of national beliefs and values, if only because they do not share a common heritage.

Of the five nations studied, the Soviet Union stands alone by reason of its unique political and economic system. If you like your civic learning pre-packaged, served up as political catechism and uniformly presented across the social spectrum, the Soviet Union is for you. The paramount and pervasive role of the state in all sectors of Soviet life ensures that no corner of society is left untouched. The absence of opposition voices in society means that the Marxist-Leninist values of collectivism, atheism and love of labour find promotion and reinforcement in schools, youth organizations, trade unions and the media.