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Some notes on the constituent structure of noun phrases

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"Let me in on the gag, you guys." I tried to be real cool about it.

The great Kahoona grinned. "It's derived by osmosis," he said. "A small girl. Sort of a midget. A girl midget. A gidget. Get it?"¹³

2. "LADY" AND "WOMAN": THE TERMS' USE IN THE 1880s

Louise M. Ackerman, in discussing today's usage, states that "the word *lady* has become fully accepted as a synonym for *woman*."¹

Perhaps the following example may be of interest in that it illustrates a usage during a period when the terms were not interchangeable:

Mrs. V. [Mrs. Van Amsterdam of a "Knickerbocker family whose blood was very blue."] (*To other ladies.*) Come ladies, I shall waste no more words with that woman!

Mrs. B. [Mrs. Bonds, a wealthy widow from the Midwest.] (*Turning around.*) Woman! do you mean to call me a woman! [punctuation *sic*.]²

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SOME NOTES ON THE CONSTITUENT STRUCTURE OF NOUN PHRASES

Robert B. Lees's article on "The Constituent Structure of Noun Phrases"¹ invites a number of comments.

Since the definite article is introduced as dependent on a (subsequently deletable) relative clause symbol, " C_N " (p. 164, rules iv and ix), there will be kernel sentences enumerated by Lees's grammar which are not sentences of English, for instance, "The C_p man is on the C_p corner" (and nonkernel, derived sentences such as "The man is on the corner"). This result follows from the definition of a kernel sentence as one which has undergone only obligatory transformations and from the fact that the deletion of " C_N " is optional. The rule must be optional, of course, if we are to have derivable sentences with relative clauses, attributive adjectives, and so on. Or, if the rule is obligatory and follows the development of the clause symbols by generalized (i.e., two-sentence) transformations, then there must be an *ad hoc* specification that the result of substituting a second source sentence (with a relative pronoun formant) for the clause symbols " C_p " or " C_m " (which develop from " C_N " in the constituent structure rules) is no longer a " C_N ." Alternatively, the generalized transformations which perform the substitution might be obligatory rules, but then all sorts of complex sentences would be

13. Frederick Kohner, *Gidget* (New York, 1957), pp. 38-39.

1. "Lady' as a Synonym for 'Woman,'" *American Speech*, XXXVII (1962), 284-85.

2. William W. Randall, *Senator Bullion* (MSS, 1886), Act III, Scene ii.

1. *American Speech*, XXXVI (1961), 159-68. Subsequent references to this article will be given in the text merely by page number.

included in the kernel. For example, "The man who is on the corner which the streets form that lead to the towns which are to the north and to the east is the friend about whom I was talking on the morning on which I saw you last week," would be a kernel sentence as contrasted with a less central, derived sentence such as "The man is John."

More generally, I think one should avoid using elements (in the constituent-structure rules) which lead to no lexical or grammatical items, but serve merely to hold a space open for generalized transformations. It may not always be possible to avoid this practice.² Here, however, the clause symbols accomplish nothing that could not be done without them,³ hence complicate the grammar, and all this for the sake of a somewhat dubious idea about the uses of the definite article.

It is simply not the case that a "conversation does not ordinarily begin with a sentence like '*The car* broke down' " (p. 160, n. 6). The point here is that such sentences are ambiguous. "The car" can mean, for instance, "our well-known car" (somewhat like a name: "the sun," "the Gemini") or can be an abbreviation for an individual description ("the car such that . . ."). Lees is apparently aiming at this latter sense in his analysis. The double usage might be mirrored in the grammatical analysis of English by introducing the definite article both in the constituent-structure rules to account for the instances in which its selection depends on real world context (just as the choice of *car* rather than *bicycle* presumably depends on extra-linguistic factors) and also by a transformation which would replace the second indefinite article in a pair of occurrences of the same noun phrase by the definite article. (The replacement would be optional, because whether this is done depends not on identity of expression but on identity of object, that is, again on real world context.)

The statement that the generic determiner is "incompatible with the so-called 'perfect' verb tenses" (p. 160) is certainly too strong, as evidenced by easily multiplied examples like the following: "The armadillo has been spreading throughout the Southwest in recent years." "The whale has long been a staple food for the Eskimo." "The rose has always been a symbol of evanescent beauty."⁴ One wonders, too, whether there really is such a thing as a "generic

2. Compare the symbols "C" and "Comp" used in Lees's monograph *The Grammar of English Nominalizations* (Bloomington, Ind., 1960), pp. 10 and 17. The latter symbol is developed by generalized transformations on p. 84.

3. Compare Lees's own earlier analysis, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-94, which is, to be true, very sketchy. I do not believe that any of the difficulties mentioned there are avoided by the later article. See now also Carlota S. Smith, "A Class of Complex Modifiers in English," *Language*, XXXVII (1961), 342-65.

4. Here, as often, the distinctions seem valid only if the right examples are chosen and others ignored. There are many sentences in which even the past tense casts doubt on the generic nature of the noun phrase: "The whale was a mammal" seems just as strange as "The whale has been a mammal." So also one can find plausible examples for generic noun phrases with locative phrases after *be*: "The neutron is in the nucleus of the atom."

determiner." Its forms are not only *the* or *a* in the singular, zero in the plural, as Lees states (p. 160), but occasionally also zero in the singular ("Man is a political animal"). To introduce such a distinction in the uses of the articles brings in a host of details in the subclassification of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. If it is true that the sentence "The whale is in the bathtub" concerns a different (nongeneric) cetacean from "The whale is a mammal," it is equally true that the ordinary, close-fetched interpretations of the following pairs of sentences are different (as to the generic nature of the noun-phrases):

The whale is a mammal.

The mammal is a whale.

The whale is large.

The whale is afraid.

The whale breathes air.

The whale submerged.

Evidently the situation is much more complex than Lees's analysis shows.

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A NEWFOUNDLAND VOCABULARY

Four centuries of settlement enrich Newfoundland vocabulary with idioms of unusual literary value, original and picturesque forms, and homemade phrases of direct simplicity, all recollecting a way of life on this continent, yet occasionally reminiscent of Ireland. More often, the forms recall a Dorset or Devon dialect lost to England three hundred years ago. Some are modifications in one way or another of British or Irish meanings; others, I recall, had spread from Newfoundland and were common during my youth in Aroostook County, in northernmost Maine.

In a short note on "Newfoundland Words" which appeared in *American Speech* over thirty years ago, Elizabeth B. Greenleaf states: "Someone should give special attention sometime to gathering and noting down Newfoundland words and phrases."¹ The following list of phonetically respelled words, with definitions and examples where required, is incomplete but exemplary:

AMPERED, *adj.* Infected, purulent.

ANGISHORE, *n.* A weak, miserable person.

ANIGHST, *adj.* and *prep.* Near.

ANINST, *adv.* and *prep.* Beside.

ARN, *adj.* Any. "Have you arn bread?" See also NARN, *adj.*

ARN, *pron.* Any. "I haven't arn." See also NARN, *pron.*

ATIRT, *prep.* Athwart.

BALLYCATER, *n.* Ice formed by spray on the shore.

1. *American Speech*, VI (April, 1931), 306. For a treatment of some Newfoundland place names, see Robert James Miffin, "Some French Place Names of Newfoundland," *American Speech*, XXXI (1956), 79-80.