

## INTRODUCTION |

MOST CHILDREN, by the time they are ready to begin school, know the full contents of an introductory text in transformational grammar. One such text is a bit more than 400 pages long and it covers declaratives and interrogatives, affirmatives and negatives, actives and passives, simple sentences, conjoined sentences and some kinds of embedded sentences. The preschool child knows all this. Not explicitly, of course. He has not formulated his grammatical knowledge and he cannot talk about it in transformational or any other terms. His knowledge is implicit, implicit in the range of sentences he understands and in the range he is able to construct. He operates *as if* he possessed the structural knowledge which is *formally represented* by a transformational grammar. Which is not to say that he knows anything of the representation itself or would even be capable of learning it.

The Russian children's poet, Kornei Chukovsky, calls the preschool child, any preschool child, "a linguistic genius" and the accolade is deserved if we think only of the acquisition of grammar. However, the child is an uneven genius. If we set him a task of communication, even a very elementary one, the genius gives way to the child. The quality of a communication can only be judged against a criterion, something which the communication can be seen to have accomplished or failed to accomplish. Let us consider a simple problem which is of this kind, a problem that has been set to preschool children. Two children are involved: a speaker, or encoder, and a receiver, or decoder. They sit on opposite sides of a table with an opaque screen between them. Each child has the same four pictures in front of him: a dog standing up; a dog lying down; a cat standing up; a cat lying down. The encoder picks out

any one he likes and the experimenter directs him to describe it so that his interlocutor on the other side of the screen can identify the one intended. The elements of discourse are all here: speaker, listener, and topic. In terms of James Moffett's "levels of abstraction" the problem is extremely concrete.

The preschool child and even the child in the early school years proves to have no great genius for discourse. As speaker, for example, his performance is likely to show the following sorts of defects:

1. Difficulty relying exclusively on language. He wants to point and the experimenter has to insist that this is a "no hands" task and perhaps ask him to put his hands behind his back. Even then the fingers twitch to help out the tongue.

2. Egocentrism. He is likely to use terms and draw upon experiences that his interlocutor does not share — perhaps calling one of the dogs "Jip" because it reminds him of his cousin's dog "Jip." He is egocentric in the sense that he fails to take account of the discrepancy between his own informational position and that of his auditor. Mr. Moffett shows in this book how profound and long lasting a problem egocentrism is in communication.

3. Failure to analyze the given information according to the problem. He is likely not to realize that the names of the animal and of its posture together serve uniquely to characterize each picture. Indeed, in describing one picture a child may look only at that one, ignoring the contrast array, and so say a great many things about the picture which have no utility at all for the task: "It's a dog and it has a spot on its back and one leg is crooked and you can see its whiskers," etc.

The minimal discourse situation described above exposes certain fundamental deficiencies of performance, but there are many others, applying to young children, older children, even adults, which can be exposed only if more complex problems are assigned. Suppose the child or adult is asked to give directions for finding someone's house or to tell a story he has heard or to improvise dialogue in a play or to explain something he has learned and understood in history or in physics. Will he be

able to order information so that the listener knows what he needs to know at each point in an exposition? Will his embedded sentences convey appropriate figure-ground relations by subordinating linguistically that which is subordinate psychologically? Will his conjoinings be logical or will they only concatenate? Does he use his transformations just where they are appropriate, producing a sequence of constructions that describes a line of thought? Can he maintain a consistent point of view when he wants to and change when he wants to do that? Can he shift styles to suit different sorts of decoders? Can he find a metaphor that captures the essentials of an entire intellectual structure? None of these skills is entailed in grammatical knowledge. None of them is well developed in early childhood. None of them can be said to have a definable ceiling but most of us get nowhere near the ceiling that the best writers and speakers make visible to us.

By what means can communication skills be taught? I agree with Mr. Moffett that it is extremely improbable that they should be affected at all by instruction in explicit grammar, whether that grammar be traditional or transformational circa 1958, or transformational circa 1965, or on the current transformational frontier. Study of the theory of the language is probably completely irrelevant to the development of skill in the use of the language. Of course the theory may have interest or value in its own right. "Proving" sentences with grammatical axioms has something of the fascination of geometry. "Now all we need," someone has said, "is a good argument for the study of geometry."

I agree again with the author that skills are not likely to be taught by dicta concerning the value of particular constructions, lexical items, or marks of punctuation, nor by drills in the use of them. A student is likely to learn something more absolute than the teacher intends; perhaps that complex sentences are better than simple sentences or that *do not* is preferable to *don't* or that the semicolon is an elegant mark of punctuation. An alert student who discovers that his teacher has a fondness for the semicolon will cheerfully strew semi-

colons in that teacher's path. What the students needs, of course, is a rich set of options and a sense of how to employ them rather than a notion that any particular option is uncontingently admirable.

Surely skills are acquired by practice and so it is a step forward to ask students to write themes as most teachers do. But practice without unequivocal, well timed, valued, and properly representative feedback will not work and that is the problem with much theme writing. As Mr. Moffett says, the student who writes or speaks to only one addressee, the same old teacher, cannot very well learn how to communicate in the range of situations that life presents. If the feedback he receives, in the form of marginal comments, is thoughtful it is likely to be long delayed and the student will have lost interest in, or quite forgotten, what it was he intended to convey. If the feedback is more promptly delivered it is likely to be more superficially based, nearer the proofreading level — a response to the surface of his message which does not tell him whether the message itself was or was not received.

In a conversation I have remembered for a long time, a teacher of English in high school, having reviewed his instructional repertoire of sentence parsing, theme grading, and teaching the parts of speech, sighed and said: "There must be something better than this." With the publication of James Moffett's book I feel able to say: "There is."

Mr. Moffett would teach the Universe of Discourse not by analyzing language but by having students use it in every realistic way. Languages are not content subjects, like history or physics; they are symbol systems and the great thing to learn about symbol systems is how to manipulate them, not how to analyze them. Symbol manipulation is to be learned by engaging in discourse of all kinds, the sequence recapitulating the levels of abstraction that seem to characterize intellectual growth.

Mr. Moffett would build the young student's repertoire of conjoinings and embeddings by a kind of expanding dialogue in which the student sets the topic with an initial sentence and

the instructor encourages elaboration with questions and qualifications and emendations. He would have students become conscious of levels of abstraction in association with the relations of discourse by having them write, as well as read, interior monologues, private diaries, personal letters, autobiography, biography, history, and science. He would have students discover the problems of dramatic dialogue by having them, for example, improvise the scene in which Cassius works upon Brutus before they read *Julius Caesar*. He would have them learn punctuation as an extension of speech by asking them to transcribe dictation and write dialogue. For senior high and college students there is a spectrum of narrative types which wonderfully heightens awareness of informational and communicative processes in both real life and literature. As far as possible in all their work Mr. Moffett would have the students provide one another with feedback rather than receive it only from the teacher.

In this book the emphasis is on the frame of reference of a naturalistic language curriculum rather than upon detailed assignments (for the latter see Mr. Moffett's *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum*). The author is agreeably diffident about his theories and wisely flexible in the advice he gives. His experience in teaching language is evident. He has a rare ability to see relations among language study, the curriculum as a whole and some of the general problems of our society. His goal is an exalted one: to enable the student "to play freely the whole symbolic scale."

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