Pleasing Linguists: A Parable

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A fictional discussion between a really behaviorally oriented psychologist and his psycholinguistic colleagues on the proper study of language. In the course of the discussion such linguistic and psycholinguistic concepts as ambiguity, language acquisition device, surface structure, competence, and rules are taken up but not proved to be useful.

Although psycholinguists are eager to emulate linguists following Chomsky, many are discovering that linguists are neither eager nor easy to please. Psycholinguists are finding that their colorless green ideas sleep furiously while they toss and turn in their self-made Procrustean grammatical beds.

I warned some of my psycholinguistic colleagues that advising linguists can be dangerous. But they only replied, "Furiously sleep ideas green colorless." When I commended them for their poetry, they viewed me condescendingly and snorted at my non-English nativity. They left me in my Markov chains and exposed me to the growling of lions and the raising of flowers. When I cringed before the growling of lions (but smiled at the raising of flowers), they accused me of harboring innate grammatical devices and templates very like those in the LAD of David McNeill.

They promised me that if I admitted that behaving psychologists can be more dangerous than flying planes, they would free me of my controlling reinforcement contingencies, and then they said I had nothing to lose but my transitional probabilities and my finite state.

While I was rehearsing my verbal behavior repertory, they informed me, claiming originality, that their friend owned three-eighths of a mongoose. Despite my absent competence, I responded rapidly by pointing to the apples cooking in my wife's pot and said, "They are cooking apples." My tormentors quickly placed clothespins on their noses and blindfolds on their eyes and smiled knowingly. They rattled my Markov chains and said they accepted my challenge to disambiguate my sentence but I was not transformed by their response. They continued, now chanting, "Two, four, six, eight—we must perform disambiguate." A brief 15 minutes later they found the kernel in the tree and then proceeded to plumb Yngve's depths.

Refreshed by their victory, they set their LADs to work and generated the following unforgettable SENTENCES: "John hit the ball. The ball was hit by John. John did not hit the ball. Did John hit the ball? Was the ball hit by John?" And finally, "Wasn't the ball hit by John?" They then thanked their Almighty Grammar for keeping them from saying (and they laughed in embarrassment as they said it) "Was by John the ball hit?"

I looked at my closed-nosed, blindfolded colleagues and asked them why they were boring psychologists. They said, "You think you are all surface structure, but, inside your mind is an acquisition device of gold. It is so splendid that even your speech (sometimes and most indirectly, but there nevertheless if only you believed) betrays its presence." I felt duly humbled, knowing that the probability of my emitting a sentence they would wholly approve of was low.

Seeing that I was not easily swayed (or pleased), they tried to remove my Markov chains only to discover that chains would...
reappear no matter how large they made the links. In vain they waited for my passive construction but I was predominantly in an active mood. They praised my competence and tried to convince me that my performance was trivial. They pitied my mere behavior and when I tried to speak according to the rules of generative grammar they could not help but smile to think that I thought their rules of grammar were prescriptive. In chorus once again they shouted,

“We do not legislate,
We merely disambiguate.”

They then brought before me a reformed behaviorist to speak to me in simple phrase structure. He struck his chest with both his fists and declared that he was freed of the burden of speaking from left to right, that he had found the infinity of sentences a life-giving tonic. He rid himself of the shackles of experimentation and found truth right in his native language intuition.

“The only operations that you need,” he said, “are mental, not experimental. The linguists shall show us the Way to the kernel of grammar.”

He fell silent, since no stimulus I could present to him had any control over his responses (he had none of these either), but I could see by looking deep into his intuitive eyes that his sentence generator was about to produce some further speech: “John, who was hit by the ball, was persuaded to leave. John, who was hit by the ball, was expected to leave. But,” he smiled gleefully, “while his leaving was expected, it could not be persuaded!”

He laughed and then he turned to me again:
“If you continue to behave, all you will learn is how to control and predict behavior. If you continue to experiment, you will discover such absurdities as English speakers’ inability to distinguish grammatical from ungrammatical strings. Experiments, you know, are here to verify, not contradict our theories. Experiments which contradict are trivial, for any fool can show a theory to be false. The trick is to design that experiment which proves the theory to be the truth we know it is.”

My tormentors removed their clothespins from their noses and their blindfolds from their eyes and began a new chant: “Our truths are universal truths for from them we can generate all sentences particular and none of them impossible, except, of course, the nonsentences which speakers really say.”

I then asked them quite naively why they did not study people’s talk, and they informed me that the trouble with actual speech is that it is too remote from people’s competence for talking. “People’s behavior does not adhere to rules and meta-rules—only their competence does, but those who wish to understand how language is acquired must take this competence into account in explaining people’s behavior. Do you understand? All you need do is employ the operation of verstehen and you will be well on your way to becoming one of us,” they continued ambiguously.

“I have often heard of the operation of verdrehen,” I responded.

“Your wilful attempt at phonological misunderstanding is but a thin veil concealing your inner but wiser competence. Free yourself from your data. Life is too short for the construction of models which explain mere behavior. Construct a model ready and waiting for sentences never before uttered! If you are clever enough, the sentences so constructed never will be uttered except by you, and then only as a result of your model.”

“You believe the child needs a language acquisition device to filter out the nonsentences from the sentences which adults stubbornly continue to emit. You appear to take behavior into account after all.”

“Well, no one is perfect. Besides, we have never said we are not interested in behavior; we wish to unearth the mental reality which underlies the behavioral fiction. In doing this we have found it possible to disencumber ourselves of a lot of excess psychological baggage. Memory would but limit the infinitely long
sentences we know our device can construct. Our failures of perception would but hinder the understanding of the infinitely long sentences. And we have made psycholinguistic work more practical by locating the ideal speaker-hearer relationships in the minds of a chosen few."

"Doesn't this take your hypothesized mental processes beyond scientific scrutiny?"

"Scrutiny, mutiny—as long as you have an idealization! You must realize that the mental processes which we use to explain your behavioral fictions are beyond your level of consciousness—actual or even potential. Don't be misled by the premature introduction of facts stemming from examination of the speaker's behavior, his comments about his behavior, or even his comments about his competence underlying his behavior. This knowledge which every speaker obviously has is not known by him. Know what I mean?"

"That linguistics has nothing to do with production and perception of language?"

"That's right! Our generative grammar says nothing about production or perception of speech. We are not interested in performance."

"Thank God."

"The trouble with you is that you have no interest in theory or explanation."

"The trouble is that I am less interested in explaining the verbal behavior of linguists than of people in general."

"All right, wise guy! How else can you explain the rapidity with which a child acquires language than by his innate template which separates sentence from nonsense?"

"Rapid? Published evidence from your own colleagues suggests it reaches completion by age 6½, and common-sense knowledge tells us that all of us continue to improve our mastery of language beyond that age. Even medical school plus internship plus specialized residency take only six years. So, what's so fast about language acquisition?"

We looked at one another in silence and then one of my tormentors said, "It's hard to please a behaviorist."

"Pleasing linguists is not easy, either. I am no longer eager to try."

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