Geoffrey Leech

Semantics

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6.7 *Case grammar*

Case grammar was first proposed by Fillmore (1968) as one of the arguments in favour of generative semantics (see 6.1), but is best understood as a version of an analysis in terms of predicates and arguments, in which the emphasis is largely upon the functions of the arguments.

A good starting point is the trio of sentences *John opened the door with a key*, *The key opened the door* and *The door opened*. There is the same verb, *open*, in all three, and in all three it is active. Yet the grammatical subjects are *John*, *the key* and *the door* respectively. We can account for these facts if we treat *open* as the predicate, *John*, *the key* and *the door* as the arguments and if, further, we handle *John*, *the key* and *the door* in terms of 'case relations' that are not directly related to grammatical subject and object, the case of each noun being the same in all three sentences. Thus *John* is AGENTIVE (='actor') throughout, *the key* is INSTRUMENTAL and *the door* is OBJECTIVE. Similar sets of sentences, and similar analyses, can be provided for other verbs; e.g. *break* or *ring*: *John broke the window with a stone*, *The stone broke the window*, *The window broke*. But the categories would still be formal – based only on relations of a transformational kind between sentences.

Fillmore suggests that his case notions are 'a set of universal, presumably innate, concepts' and proceeds to define them in semantic terms. To begin with he suggests six cases, AGENTIVE ('typically animate perceived instigator'), INSTRUMENTAL ('inanimate force or object causally involved'), DATIVE ('animate being affected'), FACTITIVE ('object or being resulting from the action or state'), LOCATIVE ('location or spatial orientation'), OBJECTIVE ('the semantically most neutral case'). In a later work (Fillmore 1971a), we find dative renamed EXPERIENCER and factitive being replaced by RESULT, with the addition of COUNTER-AGENT ('the force or resistance against which the action is carried out'), SOURCE ('the place from which something moves') and GOAL ('the place to which something moves'); in addition he talks of 'agents', 'objects', etc., instead of 'agentive', 'objective'.

The argument for case relations is not restricted to verbs such as *open*. It is suggested that the converse relationship of *teach* and *learn* can be accounted for in *John taught French to Mary*, *Mary learnt French from John*, by treating *John* as the agent, *Mary* as the experiencer and *French* as the object. Similarly *show* needs agent, experiencer and object (one shows something to somebody), while *see* requires experiencer and object. There is a contrast between *see* and *look* (*at*), in that the latter requires agent and object (with *look* the person takes an active part, with *see* he is merely affected).

Case grammar, it is argued, can easily account for the difference between *John ruined the table* and *John built the table*. In the first *the table* is the object; in the second it is the result. More strikingly, we can account for the supposed ambiguity of *Peter broke the window* (deliberately or accidentally) by assigning *Peter* to the agent on the one meaning and to the instrument on the other.

As we saw at the beginning, there is no one-to-one correspondence between case and the grammatical subject or object. In our first set of examples the agent (*John*), the object (*the door*) and the instrument (*the key*) all occurred as grammatical subjects. Similarly, the location may be the subject as in *Chicago is windy* (cf. *It is windy in Chicago*), as may the experiencer in *John believed that he would win* (cf. *It was apparent to John that he would win*). There are, moreover, some rules governing what case will 'surface' as the subject. To begin with, we cannot conjoin two different cases and so cannot say **John and the key opened the door*. Secondly, there is a hierarchical ordering of the cases which is, in part, agent > experiencer > instrument > object. This ensures that with *open*, if the agent (*John*) is present it will be the subject – *John opened the door with a key*, but not **The key opened the door by John* or **The door opened with a key by John*. Similarly if there is an instrument but no agent, the instrument will be the subject – *The key opened the door*, but not **The door opened*

with a key. Only if the object is alone can it be the subject – *The door opened*. As a means of relating sentences such as these, case grammar works well. We could easily produce a comparable set with *ring – John rang the bell with a hammer, The hammer rang the bell, The bell rang*. This ordering is, however, overruled by a transformation such as the passive, where the object will be the grammatical subject (*The door was opened by John with a key*), or with certain lexically defined verbs, e.g. *please*, where the object is again the grammatical subject, although the experiencer is present, e.g. *This pleases me*.

One major difficulty that seemed to face the early version of case grammar was that it was apparently unable to distinguish between such sentences as *John smeared the wall with paint* and *John smeared paint on the wall*, or between *John sold a book to Henry* and *Henry bought a book from John*. Fillmore suggests, in a later work (1977: 60), that this is a matter of PERSPECTIVE. In our first examples either *the wall* or *the paint* are brought into perspective. With *buy* and *sell* we have the buyer, the seller, the goods and the money, and all can be brought into perspective by the choice of verb, for we have not only *buy* and *sell*, but also *pay* (*Henry paid five dollars for the book*) and *cost* (*The book cost five dollars*).

Case grammar is attractive in many ways, but, as the last paragraph shows, the deeper the investigation, the more complex it seems to become. Moreover, there are still plenty of problems. The suggestion that the supposed ambiguity of *Peter broke the window* is explained by treating Peter as either experiencer or agent seems to be invalid, for we can say *Peter and Bill both broke the window, Peter accidentally and Bill on purpose*, and we were told that two different cases could not be conjoined. However, the fact that we cannot conjoin does not seem to be wholly determined by case: **I saw Helen and a football match* is a very strange sentence, yet both *Helen* and *a football match* are here in the object case.

Moreover, case grammar runs into the familiar difficulty of the vagueness of semantic categories. Often it will be difficult

to decide, on semantic grounds, what is the case of a particular noun phrase. Fillmore sees *the smoke* as object in *The smoke rose*, and the same would be true of *the wind* in *The wind blew*. But what, then, shall we say of *The smoke rose and blotted out the sun, The wind blew and opened the door*? Apart from the fact that both *the smoke* and *the wind* are probably simultaneously in two different cases, it seems more reasonable to regard *the smoke* as instrument than *the wind*, since the smoke was probably moved by the wind. Moreover, it is not easy to see why *the wind* is instrument rather than agent. Animacy and deliberateness have both been suggested as tests of what is agent, and these would rule out *the wind*. But it would be difficult to reach a similar decision with *The virus killed the organism* or even *The slugs destroyed the cabbages*. (Did they do so deliberately?!) A particularly difficult problem is *My ear is twitching. My ear* could be agent since it is 'doing' the twitching, or experiencer, or even location (*I have a twitch in my ear*). It is difficult to see how, even in principle, we can decide, and there is clearly a danger of ever increasing the distinctions and the criteria for them.

6.8 *Sentence types and modality*

Although it has been pointed out several times (e.g. 2.5) that language does not consist solely of statements, much of what has been said so far, has, in fact, related to declarative sentences, sentences that are typically used to make statements and so belong essentially to the descriptive aspect of language.

We clearly do not simply make statements, we also ask questions and give commands. This threefold distinction, moreover, seems to be reflected in the grammar of the languages with which we are familiar: English clearly distinguishes:

John shut the door.
Did John shut the door?
Shut the door.

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