

University of New Mexico

UNM Digital Repository

English Language and Literature Faculty
Publications

Scholarly Communication - Departments

2002

The Subject of Linguistic Analysis: Competence, Performance, Style

Hector A. Torres

University of New Mexico

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/engl_fsp



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Torres, Hector A.. "The Subject of Linguistic Analysis: Competence, Performance, Style." (2002).
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/engl_fsp/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly Communication - Departments at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Language and Literature Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.

Department of English
University of New Mexico
MLA Conference 2002
New York, New York

**The Subject of Linguistic Analysis:
Competence, Performance, Style**

“In manipulating these kinds of connections (similarity and contiguity) in both their aspects (positional and semantic)—selecting, combining, and ranking them—an individual exhibits his personal style, his verbal predilections and preferences.”

Roman Jakobson, *Two Aspects of Language*

“Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears. From this moment onwards consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of ‘pure’ theory...”

Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*

Competence

The competence and performance distinction has a complex history in linguistic theory. With this short essay, I would like to step into the flow of that complex history by posing the question of difference, which asks what difference difference makes to linguistic theory. My argument will be that the difference difference makes can be registered through the design feature of language linguistic theory dubs reflexivity. For linguistic theory, reflexivity is not just one design feature among the others inasmuch as it is reflexivity itself that motivates the question of difference. As any standard linguistic textbook will make clear, reflexivity is that design feature of language that reflects, “The ability to use the communication system to discuss the system the system itself” (*Linguistics* 2001). Together, difference and reflexivity collapse the subject of linguistic

analysis into what I will here call a singularity. I call it a singularity because it contains all at once and by no mere contingency the subject of linguistic analysis, the object of linguistic analysis, and the medium in which the former studies the latter. Indeed, one might say that the phrase 'the subject of linguistic analysis' denotes the singularity as a three-way ambiguity. The question of difference thus puts into question the different thematic roles the subject of linguistic analysis occupies in the formulation of its scientific project to write explanatory grammars. Owing to the reflexive design feature of language and the question of difference, the subject of linguistic analysis is such stuff as the singularity is made of. The singularity thus contains all the elements that give rise to the scientific activity of writing explanatory grammars and contains itself to boot.

In the light of the singularity, competence and performance are not so much opposites as already effects of the singularity. We might number the effects of the singularity thus: (i) any view or perspective on competence will automatically be indebted to performance, (ii) performance expresses competence, performative errors and all, and (iii) every formal computation over the variables of universal grammar is also a functional one. In effect, the singularity converts all uses of language into formal as well as functional processes, including the writing of explanatory grammars. Within the enclosure of the singularity, no linguist can declare the thesis of the autonomy of syntax except as a performative contradiction since the declaration of autonomy is dependent on the system to which it attributes autonomy. This self-reflexive function operating over the moment of utterance or textual production in general by no means spells the end of the autonomy of syntax nor does it favor functional linguistic analyses. Instead, as a scientific disposition, it does imply that every view of competence will have to be screened through the singularity of the subject of linguistic analysis. The epigraph from Roman Jakobson is instructive here and indeed it is what motivates my specific hypothesis, which is simply that style mediates between competence and performance. Only a theoretical and methodological fiat can keep Jakobson's view of style from having scope over the linguist's scene of writing, the place where the grammar is produced or written, there where the linguist decides on data, hypotheses, and what counts as explanatory theory. Under the force of the singularity, Jakobson's view of style is equally at work in the object-language as in the meta-language.

The practice of theory construction in linguistics, as Chomsky put it a while back, proceeds along an ambiguous pathway, works off a systematic analogy between acquiring a language and the practice of writing explanatory grammars. As such the material practice of writing an explanatory grammar, Chomsky proposed, should provide a model of language acquisition by children. The two in a sense being parallel processes, the linguist's model should adequately specify all the positive and negative outputs of the grammar children learn without fail when exposed to their linguistic environment. In typical parlance, a generative grammar should generate all the grammatical strings of a language and none of the ungrammatical ones and explain their plus or minus grammatical status. Explicitness is the criterion the grammar chooses in order to meet this responsibility. Explicitness being linked to simplicity, simplicity to generality, and generality to the strength of a theory's explanatory power, this criterion promises a view of competence that lays bare its context-free principles, the autonomy of syntax. In accord with the analogy, what the linguist attains as universal grammar through the process of writing an explanatory grammar also explains or reflects why children learn language so quickly and easily. One can say that children accomplish the great feat of acquiring a language because they need put very little or no intention into the process, the computation for language being a free algorithm, particularly with respect to the core grammar. Explicitness is thus an expression of arbitrariness, the autonomy of syntax.

However, I invoke this analogy for both its fit and misfit. On the one hand, as the work of linguists such as William Croft (1995) and Frederick Newmeyer (1998) clarifies, few linguists reject the autonomy of syntax when it is articulated as an expression of arbitrariness. On the other hand, the theoretical wisdom of this analogy puts competence and performance on incommensurable scales, makes them differences of kind not degree. The scales of grammaticality and acceptability balance on this incommensurable difference of kind, the one relegated to the domain of competence and the other to the domain of performance. This incommensurable difference, which receives a clear articulation in the idealization of linguistic data to an ideal speaker-hearer in a homogeneous speech community, brings to the fore a global paradox for linguistic theory (Chomsky 1965 3-4). As object of study, the subject of linguistic analysis possesses a knowledge that it cannot access. This subject-as-object-of-study has intuitions about

what constitutes a well-formed string but these intuitions, if they sight in on competence, are made opaque by extragrammatical factors, in word, discourse. Non-well-formed strings often appear grammatical, as a mirage appears to be water, and well-formed strings often appear unacceptable to certain subjects of linguistic analysis. Attempts to establish universal grammar as a discrete entity of knowledge are on-going, among these are those of Carson T. Schütze, who has done linguistic theory a great favor by culling together the contributions of the diverse disciplines speaking to this paradox inhabiting language theory (1996). Schütze follows the division of the analogy when he states: "Whether a sentence is *grammatical* is a question about competence... Whether a sentence is *acceptable* is a question about performance." (20). However, the neat division of the analogy, Schütze points out, has been difficult to keep intact:

This apparently simple distinction is often muddled by the fact that the word *performance* has been used in different way at different times, by Chomsky and others. It is sometimes used to refer to specific instances of behavior, or patterns in general, as opposed to static knowledge that guides behavior. In other contexts it is used to refer to anything outside of the grammar, including static knowledge of things like discourse structure or mechanisms for using language. (20).

Is this inconsistent usage of the word *performance* no more than an accidental consequence of the systematic ambiguity constituting the analogy, or is it the consequence of a deeper theoretical problem with the dichotomy in the first place? If the inconsistency is nothing more than an accident, then there is hope that someday a pure view of competence will someday rectify the inconsistent usage. Interestingly, the proposal Schütze offers to clarify the study of competence ends with a speculative metaphor that references the properties of writing, in both a narrow and a generalized sense. This is interesting because for some time now the philosophical efforts of deconstruction, understood as a rigorous delimitation of Western metaphysics and epistemology, have been going towards an acknowledgement of the debt owed to the concept and phenomenon of writing.

In the light of a pure view of competence yet to come, the singularity registers the inconsistent usage as a performance, a value stemming from the paradox inhabiting linguistic theory. Precisely at the point where the subject of linguistic analysis pulls

away from performance factors with the scientific hope of providing a clear view of competence, the singularity calls that effort of abstraction a performance, subject to the strength of hermeneutic forces. Herein, the degree of idealization, whether high or low, makes a huge difference to language theory, whether formal or functional. The difficulty that formal theory meets with in circumscribing universal grammar as a discrete and independent form of knowledge is matched by the difficulty that functional theory encounters when seeking to establish the category of *subject* in a cross-linguistic way. Indeed, the category *subject* as I just used it is radically insufficient to describe a language such as Dyirbal. Both formal and functional linguists are rightly worried about letting the grammar take decisions over the grammatical status of some string in the case of the former or the universal status of some category in the case of the latter. Croft for instance clearly expresses this worry: “At what point do we say that the category ‘subject’ does not exist [in Dyirbal], as opposed to saying that it exists but that it is very different from the English category?” (13). Croft’s question might be taken not just as a descriptive problem in linguistic theory as a whole, but equally as an effect of the singularity. You will forgive me if I now say that in both formal and functional paradigms, the subject of linguistic analysis must view the subject of linguistic analysis through the subject of linguistic analysis.

Nevertheless, the fact that performance bedevils access to competence does not in the first instance invalidate the idealization, disparage formal linguistic analysis, nor for that matter favor functional analyses. It is clear that both formal and functional paradigms enlist the aid of idealization in some form or another and that neither paradigm disavows some form of autonomy, except for the extreme forms of functionalism that Croft identifies. Nonetheless, while the invariant success of children to acquire their native language speaks of the autonomy of syntax, the absence of linguistic theories that provide explanations of pure competence speaks to the effects of the singularity. If a theory of pure competence is yet to come, might taking account of the singularity help it along? And if yes, how?

Performance

To address these questions requires a redoubling of the question of difference, another turn on its relevance to linguistic theory. This turn does not lead out of the enclosure, but in a sort of Möbius strip function doubles the topological surface. The notion of difference at work in this redoubling takes us beyond the criteria of descriptive and explanatory adequacy and in fact transgresses the correspondence theory of truth that guides linguistic theory. It is this difference thus redoubled that for some time now has been soliciting the disciplinary discourses of ethnography, literature, philosophy, and history, etc., in the American academy. To locate the origin of this difference with the founding structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure is no doubt a hyperbole, but it is convenient. Saussure begins to name this difference when he states that, “in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*” (118). This well-known passage admits of no pure identities in language. And since for Saussure the linguist’s proper object of study is *langue*, i.e., language minus speaking, it admits specifically of no pure identity for linguistic competence. Without denying arbitrariness or the autonomy of *langue*, Saussure here also draws an enclosure for language, with language, and in language. Language is an advantage for human beings not in the first instance because it insures mappings of the world that satisfy truth conditions but simply because it inaugurates the mapping and guarantees as a property of language Chomsky now calls discrete infinity. Elsewhere in the *Cours* Saussure pinpoints this advantage:

The characteristic role of language in relation to thought is not to supply the material phonetic means by which ideas may be expressed. It is to act as intermediary between thought and sound, in such a way that the combination of both necessarily produces a mutually complementary delimitation of units. Thought, chaotic by nature, is made precise by this process of segmentation (110).

For a minimalist definition of competence one need look no further than to this Saussurean articulation of the mediating function of language. Chomsky’s rewriting of *langue* as competence retains difference as an element of *langue* when he states that “Linguistic expressions may be ‘deviant’ along all sorts of incommensurable dimensions,

and we have “no notion of ‘well-formed’ sentence’ “ (1995, 194). Such a statement acknowledges that linguists are adrift in a sea of differences without the benefit of a horizon. Despite the absence of such a horizon, formal and functional language theory has made advances in the understanding of language form and function. Why this should be the case might be attributed to the Saussurean view of language as multiple mediations of differences wherein the satisfaction of truth-conditions is not necessary. This is the sort of paradox that deconstruction has been calling the freeplay of difference and which I am here re-dubbing the singularity. If there is a truth-functional account of language, it is that it is useful. Under this account, the instantiation of concepts into sound-images via the mediation of language—this competence—takes place as a matter of functional utility, as Derek Bickerton puts it (1990). Language does just what it knows, even if it doesn’t always know what it does, or precisely how. From the standpoint of this truism, competence *is just* performance, an equation that by dint of the singularity includes the material practice of writing explanatory grammars. Thus Chomsky proceeds in the face of the singularity when he states that, “While there is no clear sense of to the idea that language is ‘designed for use’ or ‘well-adapted to its functions,’ we do expect to find connections between the properties of the language and the manner of its use” (1995, 168). Furthermore, computing the effects of the singularity into this statement implies that even formal principles of grammatical theory have functional utility.

On first sight, it is difficult to see what possible functional utility a formal principle of grammar such as the Empty Category Principle can have. This principle in particular, as Newmeyer states, “does not lend itself to easy translation into a semantic or discourse-based vocabulary” (53). Within the enclosure of the singularity however, the ECP has shown itself to have great functional utility not just as a theory-internal explanatory device, but equally as important as a theoretical performance of the arbitrary mapping between signified and signifier that language promotes. Here, the difference between the form and function of the linguistic sign is doubled by dint of the fact that a well-motivated principle of grammar demonstrates arbitrariness. The motivation this formal principle of grammar receives at the level of theory-construction mirrors the motivation the linguistic sign receives throughout all our exchanges of *paroles* by dint of the social nature of *langue*. At the moment that formal language theory demonstrates

arbitrariness with a well-motivated principle such as the ECP, it reproduces in the meta-language, the theory, what already takes place in the object-language, the data. From the standpoint of the singularity, the data that follow from the formulation of the ECP count as stylistic choices—a complex index of the subjectivity of the subject of linguistic analysis. Inasmuch as the data of the ECP favor formal analysis, they cannot also count as neutral facts about competence. If the ECP is a fact about linguistic competence, it is a fact compromised by the personal disposition of the linguist to select, combine, and explain data in a certain way, what the singularity would call the performance of the subject of linguistic analysis.

Perhaps the polemics between formal and functional linguistic camps are symptomatic of the possibility that only compromised views of competence may be available. After all, it is not as if the ECP presents itself as a clear and distinct Cartesian idea in the same way as the Peano postulates. And from the functionalist perspective, it is a preeminent fact that the category of *subject* is not subject to cross-linguistic validation (Croft 1991). Discrete infinity has more in common with the notion of *successor number + 1* but their ontology as properties, the one of language and the other of the number system, is hardly in dispute. For language theory, what is in dispute is how to account for the property of discrete infinity, alias, linguistic competence. If the Peano postulates yield clear and distinct inferences to functional utility, why not a formal account of linguistic competence?

Style

Works Consulted

- Bickerton, Derek. 1990. Language and Species. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Chomsky, Noam. 1995. The Minimalist Program. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Croft, William. "Autonomy and Functionalist Linguistics." Language. 71.3 (September 1995): 490-532.
- . 1991. Syntactic Categories and Grammatical Relations. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Givón, T. 1989. Mind, Code and Context: Essays in Pragmatics. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- . 1984. Syntax: A Functional-Typological Introduction. Volume 1. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Jackendoff, Ray. 1997. The Architecture of the Language Faculty. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Mac Lane, Saunders. 1986. Mathematics Form and Function. New York: Springer-Verlag Press.
- Newmeyer, Frederick J. 1998. Language Form and Language Function. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- . 1986. The Politics of Linguistics. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- de Saussure, Ferdinand. 1972. Course in General Linguistics. Chicago: Open Court Books.
- Schütze, Carson T. 1996. The Empirical Base of Linguistics. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**English 150: The Study of Literature
Hewlett Cluster Course
CE 103**

Prof. H. A. Torres

Office: Humanities 355, Phone: 277-6180

Office Hours: T & Th 3:30-4:30, W 4:30-5:30

e-mail: hector@unm.edu

Required Text

Making Literature Matter, 2nd ed. Schilb, J. & Clifford, J.

Course Description and Procedures

The main objective of this course is to help you gain a deeper appreciation of the place that literature has in culture and society. Beginning with the myth of Oedipus the King, we will identify some major themes in English and American literature. Our objectives will be to gain a sense of this literary tradition through Shakespeare, Swift, Bradstreet, Dickinson, Hawthorne, Poe, Eliot, etc. Our readings will bring us into the postmoderns such as Márquez, Rodriguez, Saldívar, Rivera, etc. Throughout the course, we will stay flexible, selecting the readings that express your interests. We will place a fair amount of emphasis on the writing process. To do this we will work in small groups, reading each other's writing, learning to evaluate it for effectiveness. Throughout the course you will write short response papers, anywhere from 4 to 6. These papers will form the core of your grade. To make these procedure work it is important that you be willing to let your peers read your writing and evaluate it. In addition to these papers, you will also do oral presentations. Your papers will amount to roughly two-thirds of your grade, and oral presentations, along with attendance and interaction in class discussion, the final third. Again, just to emphasize, much of our work will be done in small groups.