

STRUCTURALISM AND LEXICAL EXCEPTIONS IN THREE LANGUAGES

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This paper attempts to make some general inferences from two empirical studies carried out by the author which use the same methodology, on passive and tense in German, English, and Russian. The method consists in investigating the unexplained lexical exceptions to a construction/category which is formally the same in three languages. We investigate unexplained exceptions because they are a measure of how incorrect a rule is and in need of revision. That is a structuralist point: if a language is a system *où tout se tient*, it cannot have unexplained exceptions inherent in its structure.

Keywords: structuralism, lexical exceptions, method, passive, non-passivizable transitive verbs, irregular verbs, German, English, Russian

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I want to make some general observations about structuralism, lexical exceptions to grammatical rules, and the researching of three languages at once, on the basis of two of my own research projects, one on the passive (see Beedham, 1982; 1995:66-86), which was completed several years ago, and one on tenses (see Beedham, 1994; 1995-96), which is on-going, both with reference to German, English, and Russian.

2. REASON FOR EXAMINING 3 LANGUAGES AT ONCE

Both projects involve the analysis of a grammatical category by investigating in detail the category's set of unexplained lexical exceptions: for the passive, non-passivizable transitive verbs; for tenses, irregular verbs. In each case, it is crucial that the exceptions are to a grammatical category which has the same FORMAL construction in all three languages. The passive consists formally of the following elements, in German, English, and Russian:

German	<i>werden</i>	+	<i>ge-V-t</i>
English	<i>be</i>	+	<i>V-ed</i>

Russian *byt'* + PREFIX-V-*n-*

The Russian reflexive passive of the imperfective verb using *-sya* is excluded here, because it is formally different.

The form of the preterit tense in German and English, and of the present tense in Russian, is as follows:

German preterit	V- <i>te</i>
English preterit	V- <i>ed</i>
Russian present	V- <i>ayet</i>

Here synthetic tenses have been chosen for investigation because they are formally similar. An analytical perfect, for example, has been avoided, because it is formally different.

The advantage of this approach is that one thus obtains three different angles on the same formal construction, viz. from the three languages under investigation. This is a structuralist point. Every language is a system *sui generis*, see Saussure (1983). And yet some languages happen to have a parallel construction, “the same” construction, be it for genealogical reasons, typological reasons, or out of pure chance. By examining formally the same construction in three languages, one can observe the way in which a single construction reacts to and interacts with three different language systems. The discoveries made are often mutually reinforcing. One can use behaviour observed in language A to help an investigation of language B. The progress made in language B can then be used to help the continuing investigation of language A. And so on, in a spiral of discovery.

3. REASON FOR LOOKING AT (LEXICAL) EXCEPTIONS

Exceptions to rules arise through a combination of structuralism and the hypothetical nature of grammatical analyses. A language is a structure *où tout se tient* ‘where everything hangs together’: the rules of grammar are a manifestation of this structuralist property of language. There is no part of language, in the sense of *langue*, which does not carry this property of being structured. It follows that no rule of grammar, if it is correct, can have mysterious, unexplained exceptions, which do not fit into the system. So why do all grammatical rules have exactly that, a smallish number of unexplained exceptions? The answer is because we, the linguists, never get the rules exactly right. Language (in the sense of *langue*), of course, does always get it right, because that is how it works - a language is a system of signs. But our attempts as scientists to describe that system are inevitably not 100% successful. We do our best, but we do not get it right first time. That is how science - and linguistics - works: we keep chipping away at a problem, reaching solutions to bits of the problem here and there, all the time refining and perfecting our analyses.

In other words, every (‘descriptive’) grammatical analysis is a theory or hypothesis. A theory or hypothesis open to refutation. And the existence of a large number of mysterious, unexplained exceptions to a rule is the most obvious manifestation of the inaccuracy of that rule. If a rule has a large number of unexplained exceptions, then we the linguists have got the rule wrong. In Hegelian terms, a thesis (a grammatical rule) becomes negated by an antithesis (lexical exceptions). If properly used, the exceptions can lead us to a new and better rule or analysis, in Hegelian terms to a synthesis.

It is important, then, that we are in a position to identify unexplained exceptions. The worst thing we can do is to obscure or explain away, i.e. explain unconvincingly, exceptions. Generative grammar is particularly bad at producing pseudo-solutions. We should not sweep exceptions under the carpet in embarrassment, but bring them out into the open, so that we can work on them. In the sense that one homes in on contradictions, the approach being advocated here may be termed dialectical. By homing in on lexical exceptions to a rule, trying to explain what is as yet unexplained, we can find clues as to how the rule might be revised. The basic question which we ask is: Why do these exceptions exist? (The basic answer is because we have got the rule wrong).

Obviously we are concerned here with synchronic, not diachronic linguistics. Within the framework of diachronic linguistics the answer to the question 'Why do these exceptions exist?' is a historical one. Because everything is always preceded by something, there is always a historical answer to questions of grammar. But we pose the question synchronically, and we want a synchronic answer.

The question 'Why do these exceptions exist?' is a fundamentally structuralist one. The fact that it is rarely posed in linguistics today is because, as Tobin (1990; see also 1993) points out, the structuralist revolution in linguistics never really happened.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF LEXICAL

In the approach being recommended here grammar means lexico-morpho-syntax. There are a small number of morpho-syntactic rules which interact with a large number of lexical items, to produce an infinite set of sentences. When it comes to empirical research, the relationship between rules and vocabulary is unmanageable - the number of words a rule can apply to is usually in the tens of thousands, and in principle infinite. It is not practicable or indeed possible to examine the interaction between a rule and every single lexical item which it can operate on. But the number of exceptions to a rule is manageable, e.g. non-passivizable transitive verbs number around 50 to 100, irregular verbs about 200. It is possible and practicable to examine in minute detail the 50-100 non-passivizable transitive verbs as a means of investigating the passive construction, or the 200 irregular verbs as a means of investigating the category tense.

It is practicable because of the numbers involved. It is made possible by the fact that a language is a system of signs, and by the fact that the sign is binary, consisting of *signifiant* (form) and *signifié* (meaning). Both parts of the sign, form and meaning, are fluid, flexible, changing. But as they shift and change they are synchronised. That is to say, as a meaning changes or a new meaning is introduced, it is expressed in some way by some part of the language; and every form, e.g. morph, word, refers to something, even if its exact reference changes over time. This is what a system of signs is, this is what the relationship between form and meaning is. Under these circumstances there can be no exceptions, nothing standing outside the system. The exceptions are introduced from without by the linguist, they are not inherent in the structure of language.

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