Initiation to Linguistics

Second Year

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Key Concepts in TGG (Part 1)

Introduction:

TGG involved certain new concepts about language as a reality and about the way it should be analysed. Chomsky's objection to analyse corpora is based on the distinction that he draws between two concepts: competence and performance.

1. Competence and Performance:

Competence refers to a person's internalised grammar (knowledge) of his language. This means a native speaker's ability to produce and understand sentences, including sentences they have never heard before. It also includes a person's knowledge of what are and what are not sentences of a particular language. So, it is the code which underlies all utterances in a given language. A speaker's linguistic competence enables him to produce only grammatical and well-pronounced sentences, and to avoid the generation of ungrammatical and mispronounced sentences, and to recognise whether sentences are synonymous, ambiguous, simple, complex, etc. For Chomsky, linguistics should be concerned with competence. This is similar to Saussure's concept of langue, but Saussure stressed the social aspect of langue (the collective shared knowledge), whereas Chomsky stressed the individual nature of competence.

Performance, on the other hand, refers to the realisation of this code in actual situations. It is the person's concrete use of language in producing and understanding sentences. Performance represents only a small sample of the utterances of language and is influenced by external non-linguistic factors such as lapses of memory, lapses of attention, malfunctioning of the mechanisms related to speech, stress, fatigue, noisy surroundings and so on. As a result, a speaker may produce false starts, changes of plan in mid-course, restructuring of what the speaker wants to say, etc. For Chomsky, “performance” is not the object of study in linguistics (but psychology). For Saussure, however, “parole” does provide the data from which statements about “langue” can be made.

1. Deep Structure and Surface Structure:

Chomsky distinguishes two levels of syntactic structure in a sentence: the surface structure and the deep structure. The surface structure (SS) is the syntactic structure of the sentence which a person speaks or hears: it is the observable form of the sentence. Chomsky argues that any analysis based on the surface structure encounters difficulties. Therefore, another level of sentence structure should be taken into account. The deep structure (DS) is much more abstract and is considered to be in the speaker's mind. It refers to certain important generalisations about the structure of the sentence which are different from its surface. The deep structure contains all the syntactic information needed for the understanding of a given sentence. The deep structure is converted into a surface structure after the application of a specific kind of rules called transformational rules (TRs). DS TRs SS

Examples:

* John is eager to please.
* John is easy to please.

In the deep structures of these two sentences, it is clear that “John” is either the subject of pleasing or its object. This distinction between surface and deep syntax became a major dichotomy in TGG, and, for many people, it is the main difference between the old and new approaches to syntax. For Chomsky, grammar is not confined to formal description but it should incorporate the internal processes that take place in the speaker's mind.

Exercise:

1. How do competence and performance apply to the language classroom?
2. On the light of what you have seen, what are the properties of both deep and surface structures.