The Olde Yankee Grammarian

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In his book *The Language Instinct*, Steven Pinker observes that the study of grammar provides rare intellectual pleasure and ought to be of interest to anyone who is at all curious about the nature of the human mind. However, he points out that the highly technical nature of much scholarly writing in linguistics poses problems for the average reader. “And who can blame the grammarphobe,” he writes, “when a typical passage from one of Chomsky’s technical works reads as follows?”

He then quotes the following passage from page 79 of *Barriers*:

To summarize, we have been led to the following conclusions, on the assumption that the trace of a zero-level category must be properly governed:

1. VP is θ-marked by I.
2. Only lexical categories are L-markers, so that VP is not L-marked by I.
3. θ-government is restricted to sisterhood without the qualification (35).
4. Only the terminus of an X^0-chain can θ-mark or Case-mark.
5. Head-to-head movement forms an A-chain.
6. SPEC-head agreement and chains involve the same indexing.
7. Chain coindexing holds of the links of an extended chain.
8. There is no accidental coindexing of I.
9. I-V coindexing is a form of head-head agreement; if it is restricted to aspectual verbs, then base-generated structures of the form (174) count as adjunction structures.
10. Possibly, a verb does not properly govern its θ-marked complement.

Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that this passage is not entirely self-explanatory to someone unfamiliar with the preceding 78 pages. However it might be paraphrased, is it reasonable to suppose that a person who is curious about grammar but who has no background in the subject might be able to pick up a book like *Barriers*, turn to page 79 (just before the section titled “Some Further Problems”), and expect to make sense of a set of conclusions that it took the preceding 78 pages to build up to? Such a person would be better off, I think, to start with something a bit more basic: one could try starting with page 1 of *Barriers*, for instance. Those with somewhat less background would profit from a textbook, such as Elizabeth Cowper’s *A Concise Introduction to Syntactic Theory*. This book presents a brief but lucid discussion of some of the central points of the *Barriers* theory in the last section of the last chapter. The general reader, however, will probably profit more from reading Pinker’s book, which does not attempt to explain the *Barriers* theory at all, but is written with just such a reader in mind.

Pinker’s point, of course, is that more linguists should write for such readers, and I agree that this would be very desirable and important to the field. Consider, though, that it takes Pinker twenty pages to explain the barest rudiments of X-bar theory and the concept of traces. Writing in this mode, how many pages would it take to put across the contents of *Barriers*?

Even more intriguing, to my mind, is this question: what is it that makes *Barriers*—and writings on linguistic theory more generally—seem so hard? On a scale of intellectual complexity,
syntax really so much more difficult than physics, or neurology, or installing drywall, or handicap-
ing racehorses, all of which are understood to some extent by millions of amateurs?

I don’t think so. I think that the passage from Barriers quoted above, to continue with this example, is difficult for two reasons. The more trivial one is that the terminology is unfamiliar to many people. If you don’t know what a zero-level or lexical category is, or what proper government and 0-marking are, you can’t begin to make sense of the passage.

Terminology aside, I submit that the main reason why the concepts of linguistic theory appear difficult is because they are abstract. If these ideas were made concrete, they would seem relatively simple compared to many other things people deal with every day. Here, then, follows my proposal for how to make linguistic theory accessible to a wider audience.

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Do you love language but hate grammar? Do you wonder why you can understand chaos theory but not the logic of markedness? Has I-language always been not-for-me-language to you? Help is on the way! In a unique joint venture, MIT Press is teaming up with Home Hardware and the Public Broadcasting System to create a set of instructional videos designed to complement their monograph series. Here is a preview of a portion of the video that will accompany Barriers:

“Welcome to another installment of the Olde Yankee Grammarian. We’re outside our grammar workshop here in Wellfleet on Cape Cod, and we’re all set to begin an exciting new project. Well, Norm, what are you going to show us today?”

“Hi, Howard. After our programs on Wh-movement, when we built chains to derive sentences like (1), a lot of viewers wrote in asking why (2) is bad:

(1) Which car do you believe that he stole?
(2) *Which car did you cry when he sold?

We’ve got to stop the Wh-word from getting out of its clause in (2), while still allowing it to escape in (1). The way we’re going to do it is by building some barriers.”

“Barriers? Sounds intriguing!”

“Let’s head over to the workshop.”

(Cut to the interior of the workshop: a workbench, tools, boxes of supplies and parts.)

“We’ll start by reviewing how to extract the Wh-phrase in (1). We know that the sentence starts off as (3a), and ends up as (3b):

(3) a. You believe [CP that he stole which car]
b. Which car, do you believe [CP that he stole t1]

We have (3a) laid out on the workbench. When we move the Wh-phrase, it will leave behind an attached trace. So first I’ll lift the Wh-phrase out of its slot and lay it down on the side. While I’m doing that, Howard, could you reach into the knickknacks box and grab some traces and indices?”

“Ok, Norm, here’s a trace and some is.”

“Thanks, Howard. It doesn’t really matter which letter we choose, but experienced grammarians usually start with i, then go on to j and k in order. It helps keep things straight in complicated constructions, believe me! We nail one index to the Wh-word, like so. Howard is nailing another one to a trace. There we go. Now, the moved constituent has to govern its trace, and it does that by being attached to it. You’ll notice that every index has a little eyehook to which I’m fastening a lightweight nylon cord. You can use any sort of string or wire, as long as it’s sturdy and won’t get
frayed. Make sure you cut it long enough to reach the front of the sentence, and fasten one end to
each of the indices. Now we move the Wh-phrase to the front and slot it into place. I like to pull the
cord taut by wrapping any slack around the trace.”

“Well, that’s a nice looking chain, Norm. And once we’ve done the necessary work on the
auxiliary we’ll be done with sentence (1). But how do we block (2)?”

“Good question, Howard. The problem is that the Wh-word can’t govern its trace across the
CP. So we’re going to build a barrier right there. CP is a maximal projection. If you look closely,
you’ll see that every maximal projection has a big square bracket. We’re going to fit a blocking
frame right onto that bracket.”

“Where do we get blocking frames, Norm?”

“You can make them yourself, or, if you want to save time, you can get them in the Barriers
section of any participating Home Hardware dealer. I like to use a hardwood for the blocking frame,
something that won’t warp in the damp New England weather. But you can use any wood that suits
your climate. You need a three-sided frame, open at the top, with grooves in the sides. We’ll screw
the bottom of the frame to the bracket of the maximal projection.”

“So now we have a wood frame sticking up from the maximal projection. But the trace can
still go right through the middle of the frame, Norm.”

“That’s right, Howard, as long as nothing is there. But now we’re going to slide a panel into
the grooves. Plywood will do fine. Plane it down so that it slides easily. And—this is very
important—don’t glue it, but leave it free to slide. This is called the blocker.”

“I see, Norm, when the blocker is inserted into the blocking frame, it forms a barrier over the
maximal projection, so the trace can’t get through, and that’s how we block (2). Of course, now that
we’ve got barriers on every maximal projection, I’m sure the viewers at home are wondering how the
trace gets through in (1). We appear to have lost our account of that sentence. But you viewers who
have followed the show for a number of years won’t be surprised if the Olde Yankee Grammari
has a few more tricks up his sleeve, and I’ll bet it’s got something to do with that sliding blocker,
Norm!”

“Right you are, Howard. Let’s get (3a) back on the workbench:

(3)   a.  You believe [CP that he stole which car]

In (3a), the CP is the complement of the verb believe, and the verb assigns it a thematic role.
This is not the case in (2), where the CP is an adverbial adjunct of the verb.”

“Anybody who watched our program on θ-marking will see where you’re going, Norm: the
verb believe directly θ-marks a complement that has a thematic role. So I’ll get a θ-marker out of the
box and tie one end to the verb, and wrap the other around the CP, so the little θ is sitting on the CP.
Now I’ll pull the CP snug to the verb, and whoa! What’s happening here, Norm?”

(Chuckles.) “What’s happening, Howard, is that you’re discovering what L-marking is all
about. A verb is a lexical category, and every lexical category has a little L attached to it. When the
verb does not θ-mark its complement, as in (2), the words are far apart and the L doesn’t make
contact with anything. But when a lexical category directly θ-marks its complement, the verb and the
complement are drawn closely together, and the foot of the L pushes against the barrier of the
complement...”

“And forces open the sliding blocker, leaving enough room for the trace to get through! Well,
that’s pretty ingenious, Norm.”

“Maybe so, Howard, but so simple that any child can do it. Well, that just about does it for
this edition of the Olde Yankee Grammari. Now, here’s some information about an upcoming
program we’ve had lots of requests for.”
Coming soon, by popular demand, to the *Olde Yankee Grammarian*: Having trouble following the talk about Chapter Four down at the general store? Let Norm and Howard show you how to recreate it in wood. When the conversation turns to Minimalism, you’ll be moving and merging with the best of them. When they ask you, “What were you doing all that time in your workshop?” you’ll proudly answer, “What was I doing? Almost nothing!”

At participating hardware stores. Functional projections sold separately. Offer not valid where prohibited by law.

References