

Conflicting Truths

Ken Hale

MIT

Abstract

The idea that “all truth, of whatever sort, must ultimately cohere” cannot mean that things can never, so to speak, “work against one another” within the confines of a single grammar. Some data from Navajo are presented here to illustrate a case in which strong language-specific principles governing the interpretation of sentences conflict with a general principle of universal grammar.

The title I have chosen for these remarks is inspired by Doris Payne’s formulation of one of two observed “philosophies of inquiry”. This is the philosophy according to which “all truth, of whatever sort, must ultimately cohere.” I understand her point to be, in part at least, that explanations of phenomena may depend on evidence of distinct *kinds* (e.g. form and function). I am sure that she is correct in this, but I must express some doubt about the notion that all truth must cohere. I think it is possible for something to be true in the functional aspect of language, and for something to be true in the formal aspect of language, and for these things to be in conflict, and to that extent not to cohere (if I understand that word). In fact, I think total coherence would be miraculous. I will cite an example from Navajo to illustrate the sort of conflict I have in mind. I understand my remarks about this example to be consistent with David Pesetsky’s focus on the psychological version of functionalist explanation, in which some facts of word order have “consequences for discourse-pragmatics”. My example is based on work done nearly twenty years ago by Paul Platero,

Ellavina Tsosie Perkins, and others (Platero 1978 1982; Perkins 1978; Hale and Perkins 1976; Hale, Jeanne, and Platero 1977).

The sentences in (1), (2) and (3) illustrate certain basic features of Navajo morphosyntax. The verb is inflected for person and number of subject and object — subject agreement stands nearest the stem (e.g. first singular, glossed 1SG in [1a]); and object agreement appears farther to the left, separated from subject agreement by tense and aspect morphology (e.g. first person singular object, glossed 1SG, preceding perfective aspect, glossed P, in [1b]). Third person subject agreement is nonovert, and third person object is nonovert (with certain exceptions) when the subject is first or second person. The verb stem is final in the verb word and it is generally glossed with a bare English verb; the Navajo verb word may include other elements, but these will normally be left unglossed. A central focus of these remarks is third person object agreement in clauses whose subject is also third person. This will be introduced presently.¹

The sentences of (1) exemplify both the verb-final character of Navajo, shared by Athabaskan languages generally, and the nature of pronominals occupying argument positions—these are optional and preferably absent. Their relative position when overt, though assigned here to canonical subject and object positions, is in fact variable:

- (1) a. (*Shí*) *dzaanééz yíiltsá*.
 (I) mule P.1SG.see
 ‘I saw the mule.’
- b. *Dzaanééz (shí) siztał*.
 mule (me) 1SG.P.3.kick
 ‘The mule kicked me.’
- c. (*Shí*) *yíiltsá*.
 (I) P.1SG.see
 ‘I saw it.’
- d. (*Shí*) *siztał*.
 (me) 1SG.P.3.kick
 ‘It kicked me.’

Turning now to the third person, specifically, transitive clauses in which both the subject and the object are third person, we see in (2) that (conditions permitting) there are two alternants, the “direct” and the “inverse” (borrowing Eloise Jelinek’s adaptation of these terms):


strong and cannot in general be overridden in the absence of extraordinary contextual motivation. For the purposes of the present discussion, it is essentially inviolable.

In order to proceed, we must come to some understanding of the “missing NP” in (3). Presumably, it is “small *pro*” in the argument position corresponding to its grammatical function. But if so, what is its structural relation to its overt NP co-argument? It has been proposed that Navajo is a Pronominal Argument Language (Jelinek 1984) and that it shares with polysynthetic languages the property that overt nominals construed with argument positions are adjuncts to the clause and, therefore, not themselves in core argument positions — instead, they are linked to nonovert pronominals (*pro* elements) which do occupy argument positions in the clause (cf. Baker 1996). This is an attractive idea and it has been fruitful in the study of Navajo.

There is reason to believe, however, that overt nominal expressions in Navajo are not adjuncts, at least not in the sense of the Polysynthesis Parameter of Baker (1996). I will cite one piece of evidence for this, namely, the possibility of extraction from NP, a violation of the Condition on Extraction Domains (CED; cf. Huang 1982) if overt NPs are adjuncts. The extraction process which is relevant here is exemplified by sentence (5b) below:

- (5) a. *Doo háí-da bi-líí' yíiltsáq-da.*
 NEG who-DA 3-horse P.1SG.see-DA
 ‘I didn’t see anyone’s horse.’
- b. *Doo ____ bi-líí' yíiltsá(n)-í-da.*
 NEG ____ 3-horse P.1SG.see-PRN-DA
 ‘I didn’t see anyone’s horse.’

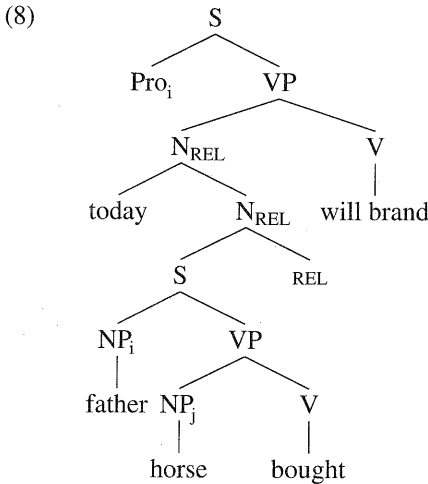
The sentences of (5) illustrate the two principal variants of the Navajo Negative Polarity Construction. In the first, the negative polarity element (a modified form of the corresponding *wh*-question word) appears *in situ*; in the second, it appears as a pronominal element (glossed PRN) dislocated to a position following the verb. In Hale and Platero (1996) it is argued that this second variant is derived by means of a movement rule, a standard case of Move- α , as depicted informally in (6)

- (6) ... doo [_{DP} ____ N] ... PRN-da
- 
- The diagram shows a curved arrow starting from the blank space under the NP bracket and pointing to the PRN-da element, indicating movement.

Now, one of the arguments in favor of the adjunct-theory of overt nominals was the existence of sentences like (7), discovered initially by Ellavina Tsosie Perkins (cf. Hale and Perkins 1976) and discussed in a variety of places since then.

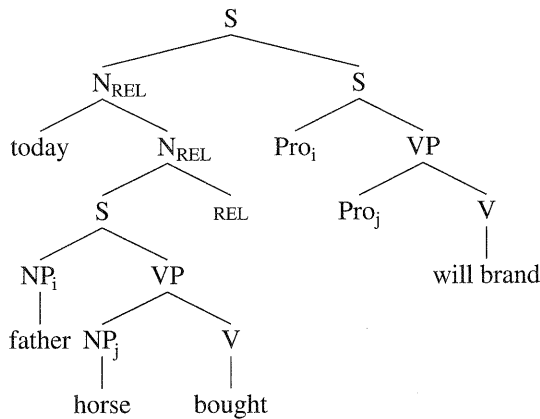
- (7) [Jíí'dááq' shi-zhé'é hí' naysiinii'-éé] yídi'dootít.
 day.past 1SG-father horse 3.P.3.buy-REL 3.FEM.3.brand.
 'My father_i will brand the horse he_i bought (earlier) today.'

The point of this sentence, involving the standard internally headed relative clause of Navajo, is the following. If Navajo is a fully configurational language, and if both overt and nonovert nominals (including the relative clause, of course) are in their d-structure argument positions, then (7) is a straightforward Condition C violation, since, on the reading given (a favored one) there is a *pro* in the matrix subject position (preceding and c-commanding the bracketed relative clause) which is coreferential with the overt subject (an R-expression) internal to the relative clause, as shown in (8):



If, on the other hand, overt nominals are adjuncts, and *pros* are in core argument positions, no such violation occurs, since no pronominal (i.e., no *pro*) c-commands any overt nominal argument:

(9)



In Hale (1983), I made reference to sentences like (7) in order to suggest that Navajo, despite its relatively rigid word order, was nonconfigurational. Speas (1990) has argued against this idea on a number of grounds, and on the basis of work on negative polarity (Hale and Platero 1996), I feel that the evidence weighs in favor of Navajo configurationality. This view is further encouraged by the fact that Navajo, unlike Mohawk, a truly nonconfigurational polysynthetic language in the sense of Baker (1996), does not permit a reading of sentences like (10) in which $i=j$:

- (10) *Si-tsilí* [ts'ídá shi-zhé'é bi-lí'-ígíí] yeiníltí.
 1SG-YBr very 1SG-Fa 3-horse-REL 3.to.3.P.3.give/anim
 'He_i gave my younger brother the very horse of my father_j.'

That is to say (10) cannot mean that my father gave his (i.e., my father's) horse to my younger brother. This is to be expected if Navajo is configurational, of course, since the matrix subject (*pro*) c-commands all overt nominals (and hence, all R-expressions). The same coreference prohibition (i.e., $i \neq j$) applies in the case of (11a, b), in which the embedded clauses are factive nominalizations:

- (11) a. [Yiskáqago ni-tsilí nih-aa doogát-ígíí] y-ee shi-t hoolne'.
 tomorrow 2SG-YBr 1ns-to FUT.3.go-REL 3-of 1SG-with 3.P.tell
 '(S)he_i told me about your younger brother_j coming to us tomorrow.'

- b. [Yiskáago ni-tsilí nih-aa doogát-ígíí] b-aa bi-t
 tomorrow 2SG-YBr 1ns-to FUT.3.go-REL 3-about 3-with
 hózhó.
 A.P.good
 '(S)he_i is happy about your younger brother_j coming to us
 tomorrow.'

Here again, if Navajo were nonconfigurational, the prohibited coreference reading should in fact be possible, since the factive complements would be adjuncts and therefore outside the c-command domain of the matrix subject (*pro*).

We are left now with the acceptability of (7), with a relative clause, and (12), with a factive complement:

- (12) [Yiskáago shi-zhé'é shi-má y-íká-'adoolwol-ígíí] y-ee yi-t
 tomorrow 1SG-Fa 1SG-Mo 3-for-FUT.3.run-REL 3-of 3-with
 hoolne'.
 P.3.tell
 'My father_i told my mother (about the fact) he_i would help her
 tomorrow.'

Why are (7) and (12) possible, with the indicated coreference reading? They are in direct conflict with Condition C of the Binding Theory. On the other hand, (10) and (11) show that Condition C is obeyed in Navajo.

The answer is suggested in Platero (1978 1982). In his formulation of the Interpretation of Grammatical Relations (IGR) Platero included a variable, corresponding to X in the version of his IGR given in (4) above. If X may stand for null or for a transitive verb, then two overt nominal expressions (NP₁ and NP₂) can, and preferably will, be taken as shared parallel arguments of the subordinate and matrix verbs in sentences of the type represented by (7) and (12):

- (13) X of (4) may be a transitive verb. It follows that (NP₁) NP₂ will be interpreted as linearly parallel arguments of X and V.

All of this can be reconciled if we assume simply that Condition C is overridden by the force of (4). Thus, assuming that Navajo is configurational, two legitimate, and true, aspects of Navajo grammar are in conflict. Platero's interpretive mechanism (IGR), part of the functional aspect of Navajo, is firmly established as a truth in Navajo linguistics — although its precise formulation may vary, to

be sure (see Speas 1990:221–237, for a different conception of the principle). And Condition C, to the extent that it is a true principle of grammar, is evidently true of Navajo. When the parallel interpretation permitted by (4) is not possible or relevant in a given construction, Condition C is in full force in Navajo. Thus we have an example of “truths in conflict”, a phenomenon which, I suspect, should not be at all rare, in fact. Here the conflict is resolved by overriding Condition C, not by declaring the sentences ungrammatical.³

Notes

1. Navajo also has a fourth person (whose properties are detailed in Willie 1991); I will not have time to discuss this interesting aspect of the language, though it is directly relevant to my topic.
2. I have glossed *yi-* as an object prefix, following custom (cf., Young and Morgan 1980:G171). However, many years ago, Hu Matthews (p.c.) suggested that it was really a subject prefix. This may be correct, and the idea is developed in Uyechi (1996). I will continue with the traditional usage here, but there is much merit in the the proposal put forth in Uyechi's paper.
3. In comments originally planned for this session I included the example of the causative construction of the small Misumalpan (Miskitu, Mayangna, Ulwa) family of Central America. There, the force of the well-known iconic properties of agent prominence and cause-effect precedence have led to the development of an eccentric subject-raising process, in (apparent, possibly real) violation of the CED (Hale 1996). LaVerne Jeanne (1978, 1992) describes an instance of Case Conflict in Hopi which is similarly overridden by some speakers (cf. Kalectaca, 1978:128) and avoided by others (e.g., by Jeanne herself). Grimshaw and Rosen (1990) argue convincingly that children who have English pronouns also have knowledge of Condition B of the Binding Theory, overriding it nonetheless in deference to pragmatic considerations.

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