

TESTING CONTROL OF THE STRUCTURE OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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A Structural Approach

You might think that by structure we mean grammar, and in a sense that is true. But there are a number of things that grammar often means that we do not mean by structure, certainly not from the point of view of tests. Grammar sometimes means giving traditional definitions to elements of speech, definitions that do not account for the facts of language.¹ The type of test that results from this kind of grammar asks the student, for example, to define a noun, a subject, a direct object, or it requires the student to write N. above the nouns, V. above the verbs, D.O. above the direct objects in given sentences. Since many native speakers of a language are unable to define or even identify by technical terms the grammatical elements of their native language we cannot accept that kind of knowledge as a test of the control of a language by a foreign speaker.

Another meaning that grammar sometimes has and structure does not is that of the artificial "correctness" of many handbooks. This correctness point of view assumes that grammar is a set of absolute rules to which the language must adjust. The attitude is that these rules were laid down by some authority who based them on reasons which we need not understand and which we cannot question. When a speaker or writer uses language that is not in accord with these fixed rules, the correctness point of view assumes that he is guilty of bad grammar regardless of accepted usage among educated speakers.²

¹C. C. Fries, The Structure of English, passim.

²C. C. Fries, "The Rules of the Common School Grammars," Publications of the Modern Language Association, Vol. 42, March, 1927.

S. A. Leonard, The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage, 1700-1800, University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature, Vol. 25, 1929.

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This point of view applied to tests would expect the student of a foreign language to use grammar which "ought" to be used by native speakers rather than that which is actually used. For example, it would test the student on "shall" and "will" in English and would count him wrong if he used "will" with the first person, in spite of the fact that educated native speakers whose speech is considered standard do use "will" with the first person.³

Does structure then mean usage, that is, what people actually say? Structure deals with the things people say, but it means more than the mere recording of examples of usage. The usage point of view does not give us any criteria to decide which matters of usage are significant and which are not; it does not tell us how to locate those elements that are part of the structure of the language, that signal its structural meanings. The usage point of view results in tests that ask the student if this or that turn of phrase is the best one regardless of whether or not the difference is structurally important. An unusual turn of phrase such as "He is capable to go" might be considered just as incorrect as a phrase like "a watch pocket" used when the speaker wishes to mean "a pocket watch."

We mean by structure the systematic formal devices used in a language to convey certain meanings and relationships. The word order of "is" before "he" in the sentence "Is he there?" – spoken with a falling intonation – is the signal for a question in English.⁴ If a foreign speaker does not react to that sentence as a question he is probably missing the structural significance of that word order arrangement. To describe the structure of English is not to describe every observable feature of usage, but to describe those features that systematically convey meanings and relationships. The difference between structure and the mere recording of usage is parallel to the difference between

³C. C. Fries, "The Periphrastic Future with Shall and Will in Modern English," Publications of the Modern Language Association, Vol. 40, pp. 963-1024, 1925. See also American English Grammar (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1940) pp. 150-167.

⁴A rising intonation is used in English as a signal for certain kinds of questions, e. g. to ask for a repetition of information just given. By using a falling intonation with "Is he there?" – the same intonation we would use in the statement "He is there" – we eliminate intonation as a possible clue for the question and leave only the word order arrangement as the signal.

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phonetics and phonemics. In phonetics we are interested in describing all observable sound features in a language; in phonemics we describe those elements that are significant.

Structure Problems as Determined by the Native Language

With an accurate description of the structure of a language we can prepare good tests, but we know that the native language of the student is a major factor in determining which structure matters will be troublesome and which will not. Even languages as closely related as German and English differ in their structure. When a given structure element is the same, is signaled the same way, and is similarly distributed in the native and the foreign language the student will “learn” it easily and quickly by simple transfer. When the structure pattern is not paralleled by one in the native language, is signaled differently, or is differently distributed the student will have trouble learning it. The degree of control of these latter structures is an index of how much of the language a person has learned. Those structures in the foreign language that are not transferable from the native language are the ones we seek to discover by comparing the two languages in order to have the most effective testing materials. This procedure has the added advantage of making our tests independent of any particular textbook since the tests are then based on the language itself.

We start with an analysis of the foreign language and compare its structure by structure with the native language. With each structure we need to know (1) if there is a similar structure in the native language, (2) if it is signaled the same way, that is, by the same formal device, and (3) if it is similarly distributed in the structure system of that language. Let me illustrate. Both English and German have the kind of sentences we call questions. Both English and German use word order as the signal in many questions — a class 2 word preceding a class 1 word and in formal agreement.⁵ So far we have not discovered any structure problem. English uses the function word “do, does, did” as the class 2 word in many questions. German does not use that device. We may then expect a German speaker to say

⁵See C. C. Fries, The Structure of English, chapters 5 and 7, for a description of class 1 and class 2 words. Class 1 words are marked for example

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for example, "Know you where the church is" as a question instead of "Do you know where the church is?" He will simply be transferring the German pattern "Wissen Sie wo die Kirche ist?" which would be similar to the pattern used with the verb "be" in English, but not with the verb "know".

Let's consider an illustration with Spanish as the native language. Both English and Spanish have the type of sentences we call questions. But questions which are signaled in English by means of word order are signaled in Spanish by an intonation contrast. We can expect trouble here since the Spanish speaker has learned to react to the intonation signal and to disregard the order of the words, which in his language is not structurally significant in this case. He has to learn to react to a different medium - word order - for the same structure. The German speaker had less of a task since his problem was simply to use a new word, "do", in a medium - word order - which he already used in his native language to signal a question. In both cases, however, we have discovered points of difficulty of the kind that we need to locate for our tests.

The list of problems resulting from the comparison of the foreign language with the native language will in itself be a most significant list for both teaching and testing purposes. It is nevertheless still a list of hypothetical problems which for final validation should be checked against the actual speech of students of the given language background learning that foreign language. This final check will show in some instances that a problem was not adequately analyzed and may be more of a problem or less of a problem than predicted. In this kind of validation we must keep in mind of course that not all the speakers of a language will have exactly the same amount of

by "determiners" (the, a, every, no, my, etc.), by inflection correlating with number, by the genitive inflection, by use in certain structural positions, by certain contrasts in form (-tion, -ness, -ance, -ment, -er, and others), etc. Class 1 includes class 1 substitutes. Examples of class 1 words: meal, cooker, heating (of a house), combination, business, etc. Class 2 words are marked for example by the third person singular inflection, by the "-ed" suffix in its various forms, by use in certain structural positions, by certain contrasts in form (en-, -en, -ize, and others), etc. Examples of class 2 words: arrange, tell, brighten, summarize, collect, etc.

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difficulty with each problem. Dialectal and personal differences rule out such a possibility. The problems will nevertheless prove quite stable and predictable for each language background.

Recognition Techniques in the Testing of Structure

Testing control of the structure of a foreign language involves two distinct processes: that of testing production and that of testing recognition. Testing structure on a recognition basis is a relatively simple matter which can be solved equally well under the conditions that usually prevail. In every case we present the student with an utterance containing the structure we wish to test, and we check to see if he understands that structure. If we wish to check an actor-action sequence in English, for example, we could present the student with an utterance such as "The boy struck the car" and then find out if he knows who struck whom. To check control of this structure in listening we would present the utterance orally to the student. To check it in reading we would present the utterance on the printed page. The basic technique is the same.

The problem of how much context to provide is also basically the same in listening and in reading. We give enough linguistic and physical context to render the structure unambiguous, yet not so much that it gives away the answer. The question of speed of presentation is also fundamentally the same in listening and in reading, but the control of the speed requires different devices. In listening tests the examiner himself controls the speed of presentation. In reading he cannot control it if the utterance is presented to the student on the printed page. For experimental purposes, however, speed of reading can be controlled by flashing the utterance, part by part, on a screen at a given rate. If such a device is used the question of the length of the utterances becomes similar in reading and in listening; otherwise we should remember that on the printed page the student can go back and reread something that slips his mind, while in listening he cannot. Another difference we should also keep in mind is that in listening the short conversational utterance is of the greatest importance, while in reading, a longer narrative utterance prevails except in theatrical

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materials which, as a matter of fact, are intended for oral presentation by the actors.

There are various ways to check the understanding of a structure. We can check that understanding by linguistic and by non-linguistic means. Among the non-linguistic media are actions and pictures. The action type of response is useful in informal classroom testing. To test recognition of a request, one can say for example, "It's warm in the room. The window is closed. Open the window." The student does not move when he hears the first two sentences, but when he hears the last one he gets up and opens the window provided he understands the request pattern in English. The identifying of a given object may also be used as an action response to check comprehension of a minimal structure signal. The teacher can place a watch on the desk and say, "Please point at the watch pocket." Students who understand that "watch pocket" is a pocket and "pocket watch" a watch will point at the teacher's pocket and not at the watch. Identification of the modifier "watch" and the head "pocket" by their position in the phrase "watch pocket" is implied in the action.

Pictures of various kinds can be used as a valid non-linguistic device to check recognition of structure signals. The pictures can depict the action involved and force a choice between what is said and what would be said if a troublesome contrasting pattern had been used. In the actor-action sequence "The boy struck the car," the student could be asked to choose between the following two pictures:

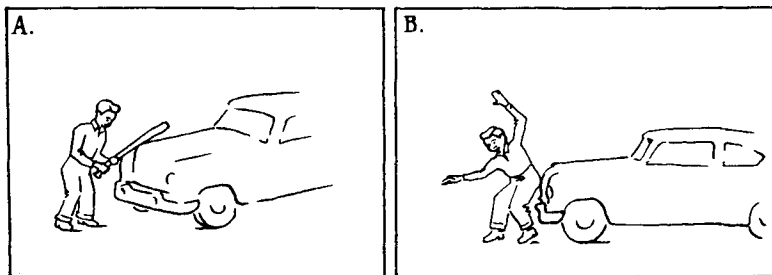


Figure 1

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If the student understands that in this pattern the boy did the striking he will choose A. If the examiner had said, "The car struck the boy," B would have been the expected choice. Since the only difference in the two utterances, "The boy struck the car" and "The car struck the boy," is one of word order, the recognition of that word order signal is decisive in choosing one picture or the other.

The pictures may depict objects whose identification may depend on the recognition of a minimal grammatical clue. For example, with the phrase "watch pocket" as contrasted with "pocket watch" the student can be told to choose one of the following two pictures after being asked "Which is the watch pocket?"

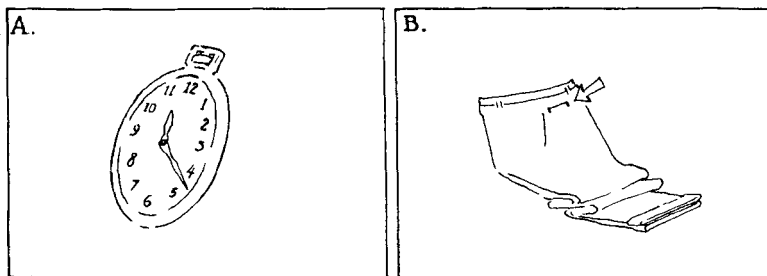


Figure 2

Since a watch pocket is a pocket the expected choice is B. If the examiner had asked, "Which is the pocket watch?" the expected choice would then have been A.

A combination of structure signals instead of a single one may be tested by the pictures. For example, the actor-action sequence "The boy struck the car" may be combined with a singular-plural contrast "boy-boys". When the student hears "The boys struck the car," and is asked to choose among the following three pictures he has to know who and how many – one or more than one – struck whom.

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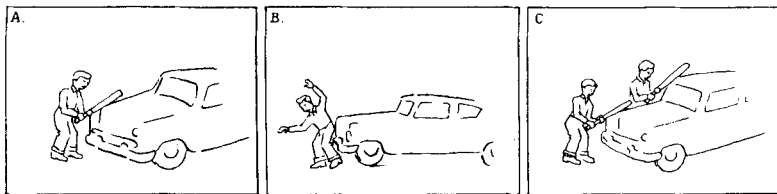


Figure 3

Picture C is the expected choice because in addition to the actor-action sequence we know that more than one boy did the striking.

Theoretically the most valid way to check comprehension of structure signals would be the observation of real language situations. This method is usually impractical, however, since it requires a good deal of time to test a single person, and what is even more important, our results will often be incomplete and not fully reliable. It takes a considerable chunk of unselected speech to sample the entire structure of a language, and we cannot always be sure that a structure was or was not understood. The student will sometimes respond properly not because he understands the structure but because the context makes the meaning obvious. We all know too that a polite "yes" does not always mean that the student understands. In spite of these limitations, however, when the problem is to check thoroughly a single structure or a limited number of them, direct observation of real language situations can be practical and useful.

Among the linguistic media that can be used to test structure recognition are the foreign language itself and the native language. In special cases in the field when one does not know the native language and the student does not know much of the foreign language we may of course also use a third language understood by both.

The foreign language itself can be used in the form of answers. For example, with the sentence "What is a watch pocket?" the choices might be (A) A watch, and (B) A pocket. The structure problem can be placed in the choices instead of in the test sentence. For example, with "What kind of a pocket is that?" the choices might then be (A) A pocket watch, and (B)

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A watch pocket. In this kind of item it is important to remember that the problem in the choices must be the structure problem we wish to test and not a new and irrelevant one.

The foreign language can be used in the choices to describe a situation we assume would exist if the structure were understood. For example, with the utterance "If the windows were closed I would ask you to open them," the choices could be (A) The windows are closed, (B) The student goes to the windows and opens them, and (C) The student remains seated. Choice C is the answer that the "if-were-would" pattern justifies.

Testing control of the structure through the use of the foreign language in the ways just illustrated can also be achieved by means of the native language of the student. The native language has the advantage that it is easily understood by the student, whereas in using the foreign language there is the danger of introducing irrelevant problems. The exclusive use of the native language to check comprehension, however, encourages the abuse of translation as a learning device.

The native language can be used in the choices with the main utterance given in the foreign language. In an English test for Spanish speakers, for example, the choices with "What is a watch pocket?" could be (A) "Un reloj de bolsillo" 'a pocket watch' and (B) "Un bolsillo de reloj" 'a watch pocket.'

Similarly, the native language can be used in the test utterance with choices in the foreign language. "¿Qué es un reloj de bolsillo?" 'What is a pocket watch?' can be followed by the choices (A) A watch pocket, and (B) A pocket watch.

The kind of item that presents various phrases and asks the student to choose the one that best fits a given utterance is better adapted to the usage point of view than to the structural point of view advocated here. When carefully edited, however, this kind of item can be valuable to us, also. Items may be constructed with linguistic context that requires a certain structure form; for example, "The (boy? boys?) strikes the car." The verb "strikes" requires a singular subject. The expected choice is then "boy" and not "boys". If the student does not react to "strikes" as a singular form he will not be able to make a choice except by guessing. He must also of course recognize "boy" as singular and "boys" as not singular. We pointed out above that we were interested in the structure signals of the

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language rather than in non-significant matters of usage. The correlation "boy-strikes; boys-strike" is an important structure signal in English. The kind of item just illustrated, however, can easily be used to force a choice based on a preferred turn of phrase which may be quite irrelevant to the control of the structure system of a language. We should keep in mind then that not everything that can be worked into an item of this kind may be worth testing. We will avoid irrelevant matter by the practice of comparing the structure system of the foreign language with that of the native language.

A technique used in testing perception of sounds by asking the student if two sounds are the same or different⁶ is not easily adaptable to the testing of structure. The variety of structures that may be operating even in a very short utterance, and the difficulty in making clear to the student which of those structures he must consider for his choice of "same-or-different" make the technique impractical for ordinary testing purposes here.

Production Techniques

The problem of testing control of the structures on a production level is more complicated than that of testing structure on a recognition level, and it has not been solved as neatly. When we attempt to test production we are faced with a number of thorny questions. Are we testing what the student can say or are we testing what he does say? Experience shows that a student who learns to use a certain structure under favorable classroom conditions may completely forget that same structure when facing a microphone or a formal audience. The only way we can be sure of what a student does say is to observe him in all his activities, and we cannot afford the time to do that except when one is making a thorough study of a limited number of structures or in cases of basic linguistic research. In general our tests should provide as far as possible the same essential stimuli as an ordinary conversational situation and no more. Testing techniques which are more or less removed from the

⁶R. Lado, "Phonemics and Pronunciation Tests," Modern Language Journal, Vol. 35, November, 1951.

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essential conditions of a conversational situation, however, may be valid for preliminary stages of control of the structure or may show statistically high correlation with more direct but less objective techniques and thus be quite valuable also.

The general technique in testing production is to stimulate the student to utter certain structures which we wish to test. If we are interested in oral production we have the student speak; if we are interested in written production we have him write. Written production lends itself readily to group testing since each student writes his answers independently and the examiner later reads them at his own speed. Oral production offers difficulties for group testing which modern recording machines have solved only in part. We can administer an oral production test to as large a group as we can supply with individual recording machines, but in scoring the test the examiner must listen to the recorded answers at about the speed that they were uttered and not — as in the case of writing — at the examiner's own working speed.

Objective scoring can be achieved in structure tests if (1) we are sure that the stimulus will elicit the desired structure, (2) the structure has been accurately described, and (3) the examiner's attention is undividedly focused on the essential element of that structure. For example, the essential difference between "watch pocket" and "pocket watch" is one of word order. If we can stimulate a student to try to use "pocket watch", the examiner can focus his attention on that word order feature and will find it easy to score the response objectively.

There are various linguistic and non-linguistic means of stimulating the production of specific structures. Among the non-linguistic stimuli are actions, pictures, and the environment itself. Actions alone can be used as the stimuli. One can come into a room and elicit a greeting. One can fake a fall and stimulate production of "Be careful," or "Did you hurt yourself?" One can appear very angry and may elicit "What's the matter?" or "What happened?" An examiner could thus theoretically observe and score certain structures. But this approach is obviously impractical for ordinary testing purposes.

The environment can be used to stimulate oral production of given structures. One may take the student to a museum and get spontaneously such utterances as "This is very beautiful," "I like this." "I don't like this," "What is this?" One may

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take him to visit a prison and stimulate such utterances as "I wonder why he is here?" "What did he do?" "What do you think he did?" Such a device is certainly a valid one, but it too is impractical for ordinary testing.

Pictures of various kinds can be used alone to stimulate production of specific structures, and although they save a great deal of time as compared with actions and the environment, even the pictures are uneconomical unless they are combined with at least a minimum of linguistic context. One can actually show a complete silent film to a student and not obtain much of a verbal reaction at all unless we accompany the showing of the film with verbal instructions of some kind.

Pictures with a brief verbal context can be used to test structures in a variety of ways. A simple question or request lets the student know what he is expected to do with the picture or series of pictures. Description of the following two pictures for example can be elicited by saying, "What do you see?" "What is happening?" "Tell me what you see," "Tell me what is happening," or "Describe the pictures."

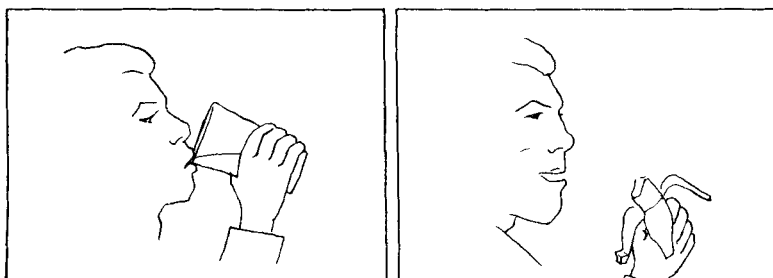


Figure 4

The usual response will be "He is drinking something." "He is eating something." or a reasonable variation thereof.

Variations of tense and aspect can be elicited with the same pictures by changing the verbal directions. One can say, "This happened yesterday. Tell me what happened," and the response will then be "He drank something," "He ate something." We can say, "This was happening yesterday. Tell me what was happening," and the response will be "He was drinking," "He

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was eating." We could ask, "What happened to the water in the glass?" to elicit "It was drunk by the man," but the following picture would be more likely to get that pattern as a response. We would ask, "What happened to the man?"

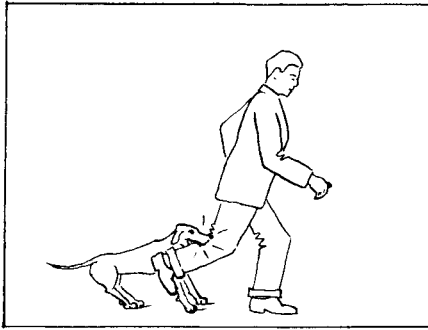


Figure 5

The response would be "He was bitten (got bitten) by the dog."

To elicit "could" or "might" with a verb we could use a picture like the following one and say, "What would happen if the cat jumped over the fence? Give all the possibilities for the rat. Use complete statements."

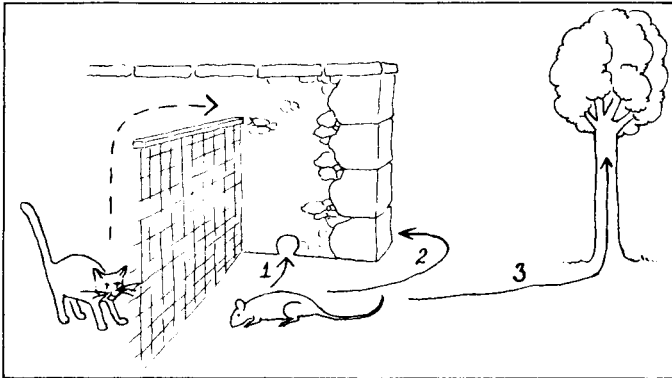


Figure 6

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The response would be something like "If the cat jumped over the fence the rat would run away. The rat would run to the hole. It could run around the wall. Or it could climb up the tree." The examiner would listen only to the use of "could" or "might".

The verbal context accompanying a picture may direct the student to reproduce the conversation that presumably takes place. "What does she ask?" with the following picture elicits, "Is it raining outside?" from native speakers of English. Spanish speakers learning English often say, "It is raining outside?" or "Is raining outside?" with a rising intonation as their signal for the question, instead of the usual word order signal of English.

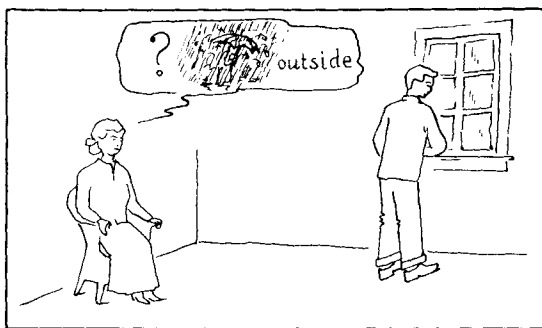


Figure 7

The examiner, of course, listens only for "is it" as contrasted with "it is" or "is".

Since our aim in using pictures is to elicit certain structures, we are free to select any lexical content that is easily picturable. We can also design the pictures in such a way as to elicit a particular structure over other possible ones. For example, picture A below emphasizes politeness and picture B does not. The same question, "What does the man say?" will elicit different responses from the two pictures.

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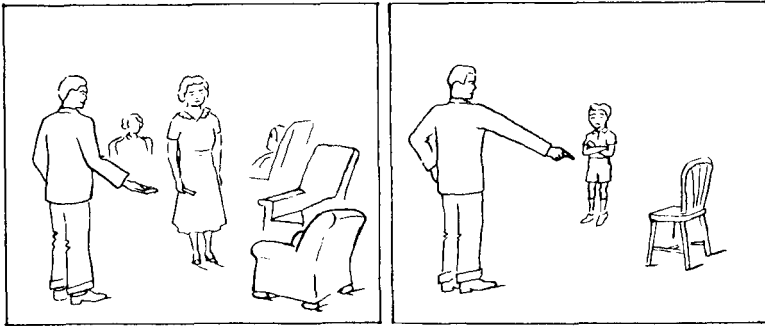


Figure 8

The response to A is likely to be a polite form such as "Please sit down" or "Won't you sit down." The response to B is more likely to be "Sit down." Presenting several pictures in a unified sequence of some kind also helps to define the response that is expected.

Even with careful verbal directions and with painstaking editing of the pictures certain ambiguities are certain to arise for at least some of the students. We can of course ignore these confusions and score the responses as if all the students had understood all the pictures and were clear on what utterance they were expected to produce. But we can also supplement the picture stimulus with a verbal stimulus in the student's native language in those cases in which he may be confused. Also, when the same pictures are used several times with different verbal directions, we can define the pictures the first time they are used. These additional props in the native language of the student or in the foreign language render the test scores more comparable in the sense that we are then more sure that all the students tried to produce all the utterances.

Language stimuli can be used alone to effectively elicit specific structures in testing. The language stimulus can be more or less natural — questions and answers — or more or less artificial such as substitution of elements in a sentence, conversion of one pattern into another, completion of a sentence, and translation.

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Questions can be used in an interview type of test. The examiner simply asks a series of questions in order to elicit the structures he wishes to test. He asks for example, "Where are you from? When did you arrive? What are you going to study?" The desired responses are "I'm from . . . I arrived . . . I'm going to study . . ." The examiner is observing the use of "am" with first person, the "-ed" preterite in "arrived," and the "going to" future in "I'm going to study . . ." The particular country, the date of arrival, and the subject of future study are quite immaterial to the test.

The use of questions to elicit certain structures has two main limitations: (1) short answers not containing the desired structures may be used quite naturally, and (2) the form of the question itself may give away the answer. The first difficulty can be partly obviated by asking the student to use "complete" statements. If for example he answers the question "Where are you from?" with a simple and natural "Colombia," we can ask him to use a "complete" statement and he will usually understand that we want him to say "I'm from Colombia." The moment we ask the student to use complete statements we are of course using an artificial technique in the test.

The second difficulty, that of giving away the answer with the form of the question, reduces the value of the question technique in those cases in which the structure being tested must be contained in the question. In those other cases in which the structure need not be part of the question, the technique is an excellent one. For example the question technique is very effective in testing preterite tense inflection in English. We ask "What did you eat?" to elicit "I ate . . ." In the question we supply the simple form of the verb "eat" to elicit the preterite form "ate" in the answer. What we supply is a lexical item which we are not testing, to elicit a preterite structure signal which we do want to test. Since the question pattern with "did" can be used with all verbs except "be" in present day English, we have here a device to test practically all the preterite forms.

Another fairly natural way to elicit given structures for testing purposes is that of describing a situation or thing and having the student name it or say what would be said in that situation. For example, we want to elicit the question pattern illustrated by "How old is the baby?" You can say, "A friend had a baby. You want to know its age. What do you ask?" and

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the response will be an attempt to produce the question pattern you are testing. If the response takes another form such as "Please tell me the baby's age," you may further limit the response by saying, "Begin with the word 'how'".

There are various more or less artificial ways to elicit given structures by the use of language. One of them is simply to supply a given utterance and have the student change it into another. To test the use of negative verb forms one can supply affirmative sentences, "John was absent yesterday. He went fishing. Why did he go?" and have the student change them to the negative sentences, "John wasn't absent yesterday. He didn't go fishing. Why didn't he go?"

Another technique consists in supplying substitution elements that require adjustment of a given sentence. The student makes the necessary adjustments in the sentence as he incorporates the substitution elements. One can take the sentence "Where did he study last year?" and ask the student to substitute "next year" for "last year". The expected response would be "Where will he study (is he going to study) next year?" The examiner continues giving substitutions and the student modifies the sentence accordingly. This is an artificial technique to be sure but it can range over a variety of structures in a short time. The substitutions need not be confined to a particular element of the sentence. One can supply "does" and have the student say, "Where does he study?" Similarly we can supply "was" to elicit "Where was he studying?", "they" to elicit "Where were they studying?" etc.

A widely used technique for limited production of structure is the completion type of item. It can be used to elicit required forms as in the example, "The child are asleep." The student supplies the plural form of "child". It can be used to elicit a limited sequence as in the example, "John asks, 'What time is it?' Mary answers, 'I don't know what time .'" Because of difficulty in limiting the possible answers, a list of answers is sometimes given, but we then have what amounts to a recognition item and not strictly speaking a production one.

Word order problems can be tested by supplying the elements of a sentence in parts and letting the student put it together in proper order. The following elements can be put together into a sensible sentence by a speaker of English: Talks. Tonight. About. At. John. The club. Boats.

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Translation from the native language can be used effectively to test structure. I have hesitated to use translation because too much emphasis has already been placed on translation in general practice. The abuse of translation both in testing and in teaching can have a deadening effect on progress. But as one more device among others it can be of considerable use. Since our working procedure is first to prepare a list of the problems to be tested and then to prepare items to test those problems, we try to use first those techniques that most nearly approach the essential elements of a conversational situation. When a variety of such techniques still leaves a residue of problems not tested it is certainly better to use translation with them than to leave them untested altogether.

If one finds it impractical to test oral production by having the student actually produce the language one may substitute as a compromise a recognition technique or a writing technique provided there is a high correlation between the results thus obtained and those we would obtain by direct oral production on the part of the student. Such a high correlation of course cannot be taken for granted but must be demonstrated with an adequate sample of cases.

Summary

The new structural approach to grammar as it applies to structure tests constitutes the basis for improved content in such tests. We are interested not in definitions, not in "correctness," not in usage per se. We are interested in the significant elements of arrangement and form that signal certain meanings and relationships and constitute the structure system of a given language. Since the structure of the native language of the student determines in large measure his problems in learning the structure of the foreign language we can further improve the content of our tests by comparing the foreign language with the native language. We thus locate the points of dissimilarity in the two structure systems, dissimilarities that represent problems to be overcome by the student in mastering the foreign language. Various recognition and production techniques described above can be used to test the control of those structure problems, which actually constitute an index of the student's control of the foreign language structure.

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