# FOUNDATIONS OF LANGUAGE

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Karl Heinz Wagner, *Generative Grammatical Studies in the Old English Language* (Vol. XI *Wissenschaftliche Bibliothek*) Julius Groos Verlag, Heidelberg, 1969. 298 pp. DM 24.

The book under review is one of the very few attempts to apply the principles and methods of Generative Grammar to a dead language, or, in our case, to a historical stage of a modern language, namely Old English. What I want to make clear from the outset is that Wagner succeeded to a considerable degree in his attempt to give "a detailed linguistic analysis and description of a restricted though substantial part of the regularities and mechanisms which account for the corpus of utterances of the Old English language of the Alfredian period." (1).

Wagner's book – presented as a "Dissertation zur Erlangung des Doktorgrades der Philosophischen Fakultät der Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel" – should prove especially helpful for students in the field of historical philology insofar it may serve not only as a concise and detailed synchronic description of a substantial part of OE morphology and phonology, but also as an introduction to the theory of generative transformational grammar (mainly in its developmental stage testified in Chomsky's *Aspects* (1965) and *Topics* (1966)).

On the first 30 pages of the introductory chapter the reader will find a brief outline of the main features of the theory of generative transformational grammar. In my opinion this brief outline makes the whole book certainly more readable and understandable, not only for those readers "who are not familiar with the theory of generative grammar" (2), but also for the more or less initiated because it is in this section where the notional and notational apparatus is developed with which in later chapters the grammatical descriptions are carried out.

The author's "original aim was to restrict the *scope* of this study to an analysis and description of the morphology and phonology of O.E." (31). Yet, he justly considered it necessary to provide an appropriate syntactic frame that would suit his purposes better than previous syntactic descriptions of OE could. More precisely, Wagner restricts his field of investigation to the morphophonemics of inflected OE words. Wagner is, of course, aware of the dangers and pitfalls a linguist is confronted with if he sets out to write a generative transformational grammar of a dead language. These problems are dealt with by Wagner in the section 0.5 *On the Applicability of Generative Grammar to Dead Languages* (35–39). In his cogent discussion of various criteria for assessing the applicability of a generative transformational grammar to a dead language, in our case Old English, Wagner makes – among others – an important point in arguing that although "the only material

available in a dead language is a corpus of written utterances" (35) these utterances are nevertheless not to be regarded as sentences *qua* abstract elements of some language system (*langue*) but only as realizations of such sentences. Wagner then concludes, correctly, that a generative grammar based on generalizations about the *utterances* contained in a corpus will also generate a certain subset of deviant *sentences* – this being due to the implication that utterances *qua* elements of *la parole* may not be full realizations of well-formed sentences. This problem, however, arises also when dealing with a living language. The difference between grammars of living and dead languages lies only in a lesser degree of approximation to the "ideal" grammar of languages of the latter sort. Finally, Wagner points out "that the limitations discussed... are far less severe in the fields of morphology and phonology" (38/39). This is undoubtedly true, especially with reference to the field of inflectional morphology with which Wagner's study is mainly concerned. (Things would be different if the description of derivational morphology – or word-forming processes in general – were at stake.)

In the next two chapters Wagner sets out to give a sketch of the syntactic component of OE grammar with its usual subcomponents: a base and a transformational component (44–156). Although Wagner tries to minimalize the value of this very substantial part of his book by saying that "the main purpose of the following discussion of the syntactic component of the O.E. grammar is merely to set the frame for a more detailed description of the morphological and phonological regularities" and that "no attempt at anything like exhaustiveness or definiteness is implied" (44) it is especially in the first chapter – handling the base component – where a wealth of well-organized reflections and discussions on how to construct the base component of an OE grammar are to be found. This chapter includes a description of the formation rules of the base component where also several alternative solutions are considered, "an analysis of the morpho-syntactic features of nouns, verbs and pro-forms which eventually determine the phonological representation of grammatical morphemes, and a discussion of the subcategorization and selectional rules, of the lexicon and the lexical rule" (44).

It is especially the chapter on *Formation rules* (44–65) that shows most clearly that Wagner is not content just to apply Chomsky's hypotheses – e.g. those found in *Aspects* – to the construction of a set of formation rules for the derivation of abstract syntactic structures underlying sentences of Old English. Wagner's rather detailed attempt to provide us with a deep syntax of OE has the merit to bring into play the *theme-rheme* perspective that interacts with the purely grammatical order of elements as displayed in the structure of subordinate clauses which are – not without reason – considered to be basic. However, Wagner's approach to introduce the *theme-rheme* pair as

constituents of basic syntactic structures is not without problems. It seems at least questionable to put the *theme*-constituent on a par with sentence markers like *Imp* or $Q$ as can be seen in the third of his first five formation rules:[1]

F 1:    Sentence → (Mod) S
F 2:    S          → I Nucl
F 3:    I          → $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Imp} \\ Q \\ \text{Th} \end{array} \right\}$
F 4:    Nucl    → Sb (Act) VP
F 5:    Act      → (Obj) (Dat) (Gen) (Loc) (Inst) (Ag)    (53–59).

On the ground of rather general arguments it would seem more plausible to replace the *Th*-symbol in F 3 by some such symbol as *Decl* or *Ass* (standing for *declarative* or *assertion*). One reason for this alternative would be that the *Th-Rh* function might also come into play in *Imp*- and *Q*-sentences.[2]

As can be seen from F 4 and F 5 Wagner adopts more or less Fillmore's version of a base component. On the whole this seems to be a rather promising line of development as fas as a syntactically motivated base component is concerned. At least, such a base component would afford a better solution for handling problems arising when an interpretative semantic component is added; the reason is obvious: only if the base component contains already informations about such categories as "agent", "instrument" etc., only then can it be assumed that the abstract syntactic structures of sentences generated in the base component determine uniquely the semantic structure of these sentences.[3]

Considering again F 5 it is implausible to include a functional Label *Gen* as a possible expansion of *Act* ( = "actant"). That *Gen* cannot be reckoned under the deep structure case categories is – at least partly – deducible from Wagner's own observations: in footnote 15 (122) he states that it "differs from other cases in that in many instances its function is to neutralize certain other cases in certain environments, for instance in nominalizations: *John arrives → John's arrival, Someone murdered John → John's murder*, etc." In the next sentences Wagner tries to make a point in saying that "Fillmore is

[1] In fn. 14 (121f.) Wagner himself seems to be aware of the problematic nature of this proposal. Instead he there proposes a revised version that "operates entirely in terms of syntactic features such as [∸ subject], [+ theme], [+ rheme], so that there is no need for dummy elements like Th, Rh or Sb."
[2] Cf. the unpublished paper by C. Rohrer (Stuttgart University): 'Zur Theorie der Fragesätze'.
[3] Cf. Chomsky's *Topics in the Theory of Generative Grammar* (1966, 7) and my paper 'Generative Semantics vs. Deep Syntax' in: *Studies in Syntax and Semantics* (ed. F. Kiefer), *Foundations of Language*, Supplementary Series vol. 10 (1969), 80–90.

wrong in assuming that the 'objective' preposition re-emerges in nominal-izations such as *the opening of the door*. It may at best be regarded as the neutralization of an 'objective' preposition". In my opinion we can only speak of a neutralizing function of the Genitive *qua* phenomenon arising in the course of transformational operations insofar as nominalizations occur as the result of such operations. One further argument that can be adduced from Wagner's own findings is that in constructing a "subjectivization rule" (134f.) he states as one of the conditions for an actant to become the subject of a sentence that "*act ≠ Gen*"! Wagner's motivation for this condition is strictly empirical: "... I have found no instances of genitive subjectivization". (134). After all it was already "proven" by Meiner in 1781 – maybe by means of a curious argument – that "Dieser *Casus* wird ... darum *Genitivus* genennet, weil er von den übrigen *Casibus*, die von dem Prädikate unmittelbar abhän-gen, erst erzeuget [sic] wird."[4]

However, such critical points are untypical for Wagner's work as a whole. In the remainder of Chapter 1 we find a very careful and balanced presenta-tion of morpho-syntactic features as *Tense, Phase, Aspect*, etc. (for verbs), and *Class, Gender, Number, Case* (as an inflectional category!) (for nouns). The purpose of the paragraphs dealing with these morpho-syntactic features "is to show that the 'traditional' treatment of inflectional morphology in generative grammars is inadequate and to propose an alternative solution" (66). I am inclined to subscribe to Wagner's own evaluation of this sub-chap-ter: "The least that can be said about our alternative proposal is that it is as adequate and as economical as previous frameworks. In many respects, particularly in connection with inflectional morphology, it can be regarded as the more acceptable general framework" (88).

The Sub-chapter 1.3 *Subcategorization Rules* follows in the main an 'orthodox' Chomskyan line, however, it is remarkable for the fact that use is made of a wider array of what Wagner calls "semasio-syntactic" features such as $\pm Ag$, $\pm Caus$, $\pm Inst$, etc. The first chapter concludes with a summary of F-rules plus a sample derivation of the old English sentence *þaet bearn aet þone aeppel*.

In the second chapter – *The Transformational Component* (129–158) – Wagner restricts – understandably enough – his discussion "to rules that are of immediate concern for the description of morphology and phonology. ... The main purpose of this chapter is, therefore, to show what types of rules are necessary in order to derive the structures on which subsequent morpho-

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[4] Johann Werner Meiner, *Versuch einer an der menschlichen Sprache abgebildeten Ver-nunftlehre, oder Philosophische und allgemeine Sprachlehre*, Leipzig 1781, 167. An edition of this – as it seems not wholly outdated work – together with a commentary is in prepara-tion as a volume 6 of the series *Grammatica Universalis* (ed. H. E. Brekle) (forthcoming 1971).

logical and phonological rules can operate" (133). Two sorts of transformational rules are distinguished:

"(i) rules that apply in a cycle (cyclical rules)

(ii) non-cyclical rules that apply after the termination of the transformational cycle (postcyclical rules)" (129).

Among the cyclical rules that apply to each sentence structure in turn, beginning with the "lowest" sentence, Wagner distinguishes the following kinds:

1) a *subjectivization rule* by which from the set of actants the surface subject of a sentence will be selected. Certain conditions respected, the following four categories of actants may be subjectivized: *Ag, Obj, Inst,* and *Dat*;

2) a *thematization rule* that can only be applied after the subjectivization rule because the theme of a sentence may also be its subject — This rule "selects an actant as the theme of the sentence. Only those actants that have been mentioned in preceding sentences may be selected" (136);

3) a *pronominalization rule*;

4) *rules* for handling transformational problems connected with *Voice* and *Aspect*;

5) *rules* for reducing *relative clauses.*

Post-cyclical rules are distinguished from cyclical rules in that they are linearly ordered and "apply to any item that meets the conditions stated in the rule ... the operation is repeated until all items are accounted for" (145). Typical cases for postcyclical rules are those that assign relevant noun and verb features to constituents like [ + N], [ + V]. Furthermore we find rules for Preposition and Article segmentation and Word Order.

The third and last chapter – *The Morphonological Component* (159–291) – discusses "in some detail the basic regularities of the morphonological component of O.E. It contains an analysis and description of the system of O.E. morphonemes and of the morpheme structure, the morphological and phonological rules. The description is incomplete in that it is mainly restricted to the major categories noun, adjective, and verb, while excluding a number of irregular items" (159f.).

The very fact that this chapter contains a huge amount of neatly organized rules and analyses relevant for a consistent description of the rather complicated phenomena of OE morphology and phonology precludes a detailed discussion. (This restriction, of course, holds only true for the present reviewer.) The following remarks will therefore be nothing more than a brief orientation about the aims and contents of this very substantial part of Wagner's book.

3.1. *The System of O.E. Morphonemes* (160–173). Wagner subscribes to the Jakobson-Halle doctrine that "phonemes in the traditional sense cannot be used for the abstract representation" (15) of morphonological regularities. Instead a set of distinctive features are considered as phonological primes; "phonemes are then secondary phonological units composed of those phonological features which determine their position in the phoneme system" (16).

Besides concise representations of various morphonemic relationships, e.g. alternances like /bb/ ~ /f/, given certain conditions, distinctive feature matrices of the consonantal and vocalic morphonemes of OE are developed.

3.2. *Morpheme-Structure Rules* (173–202). In this section Wagner discusses such aspects of OE morpheme structure as the regularities that underlie the initial consonant clusters. As far as the description of final consonant clusters is concerned Wagner does not propose a definite analysis because "there are a number of problems that can only be solved if derivational morphology is taken into account" (189) (which is outside the objective of his study). To complete his analysis of OE morpheme structure Wagner sets up a number of rules thus describing the regularities underlying different vocalic nuclei.

In the sub-chapters 3.3–3.5 (202–270) Wagner offers a detailed description of the morphonological structure and inflectional alternations of OE verbs, nouns, and adjectives.

The last two sub-chapters – 3.6, *Morphological Rules* and 3.7, *Phonological Rules* – (271–285) contain morphological redundancy rules, morphological matrices, morphological rewrite rules and a complete and ordered list of phonological rules.

To conclude, a few more general remarks shall be added. Although Wagner's motivation for treating deep-syntactical and transformational aspects of OE is to be seen – according to his own words – mainly in the necessity for positing "rules that are of immediate concern for the description of morphology and phonology" (133), it is nevertheless not always clear that such an "immediate concern" exists. On the other hand the attempt to present a description of OE syntax – be it incomplete – along generative transformational lines should certainly be welcomed.

A discussion of G. M. Motherwell's dissertation[5] – not mentioned in Wagner's concise bibliography – would have certainly been useful, alone from a methodological viewpoint; taxonomic vs.generative transformational treatment of OE morphology.

Wagner has produced an important study that OE and other philologists and linguists can ill afford to overlook. To say the least, it is a fine piece of documentation on how relatively well known facts in the field of diachronic

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[5] *Old English Morphemic Structure: A Grammatical Restatement.* Indiana Univ. Diss., 1959.

linguistics can be given a more coherent presentation, and, what is more significant, how hitherto unknown generalities in OE syntax and morphology can be consistently developed and described by means of the theoretical apparatus of generative transformational grammar.

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