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Chafing at Anti-Allomorphs

David Thomas

Chafe (1970 p. 31-35) speaks of the varying forms for Onondaga 'big' as describable in terms either of processes or of allomorphs. (1) He claims that a process statement gives a more economical description of the Onondaga data; and (2) he also claims that an allomorph description necessarily presupposes a too-simple view of psychological reality. I consider his two claims questionable, the implication of his two claims not logically implied, and his first dichotomy not logically necessary.

(1) Chafe claims that a process statement of the data allows for greater generalization to other Onondaga data since a causality rule is more powerful than the sheer memorization of forms. This is true. But he overlooks the principle of analogical formation, which is also more powerful than the sheer memorization of forms, and which was a principle around which much linguistic study has been built, including work of such people as Bloomfield, Sapir, and Martinet. That analogical formation does actually operate in language is clearly seen in folk-etymologies and in many children's speech forms. This would considerably weaken the claim for the descriptive superiority of a process statement. And Chafe's own diagrams (p. 34) of the two views show the allomorph statement as descriptively simpler for the data presented.

(2) With regard to psychological reality, I would question Chafe's restatement of the relevant assumptions of the "Bloomfieldian" era. (I, like Chafe, learned my basic linguistics in the 1950's (1950-1954.) I would restate the assumption to say that the brain is capable of a high

degree of abstraction, but that in the interests of careful science we should not posit abstractions to any degree beyond what is empirically verifiable or justifiable. With the assumption behind Bloomfieldian theory and practice restated this way, Chafe's claims for the psychological superiority of process statements are weakened.

Then, even if we should grant, for the sake of the argument, that a process statement for the Onondaga data is better than an allomorph statement, it does not follow that process statements are better than allomorph statements for all language data. Some cases, such as the irregular English am, are, is forms, are surely much more simply handled by allomorph statements than by process statements. A theory of language that allows both process statements and allomorph statements is a more powerful tool than a theory which restricts itself to either one or the other, and I feel it is truer to the complex reality of language.

To turn to Chafe's beginning assumption, he presents us with an either/or choice -- process or allomorphs. And by process he means positing an underlying theoretical form. This forced choice is unnecessary and in fact neither alternative appeals to me as a good solution. There are at least two other good alternatives. One alternative is a process statement which builds not on a theoretical underlying form but on the most common or the most convenient actually occurring form, this form then being labelled the basic form to which the processes are applied. This model relieves the necessity of positing unverifiable abstract forms, yet still retains the advantages of processes. The psychological basis for this model includes the notion that a very common form of a word will generally become subconsciously considered more basic than an

uncommon form of a word, hence the descriptive choice by the linguist of the most common form as basic, all else being equal. Also included in this model is the assumption that a form occurring in isolation is generally psychologically conceived of as more basic than a bound form. And a form containing predictable deletions or additions is less basic than an unpredictable form (Nida 1947). Where only one of these factors is found, the form thus indicated would be considered basic. Where these factors are found in conflict, the linguist must weigh the factors to decide which form to consider basic, or else the psychological possibility must be permitted of holding two or more forms as equally basic.

Another alternative is a paradigmatic statement of allomorphs, a battery statement positing an underlying semantic entity (sememe?) which finds its manifestation in different forms in different environments, analogous to the batteries that can be set up for clauses (Thomas 1964, 1973). This has the advantage over Chafe's and Nida's processes that it can handle equally well regular and irregular forms, specifying manifesting regular forms as deducible from normal patterns, and specifying manifesting irregular forms needing memorization. It has a purely semantic form as its base, not a partially phonologized form, and puts all phonologizing rules directly into the surface manifestation rules. It posits an abstract (or psychological) sememe, but avoids the need for further abstractions.

To sum up, Chafe's case for his underlying abstractions and processes is considerably weaker than it appears on the surface. And there is a certain amount of appeal in models that admit both process and allomorph statements. We are still in the position of blind men examining the elephant: the beast (language) is bigger and more complex than any of our theories.

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