

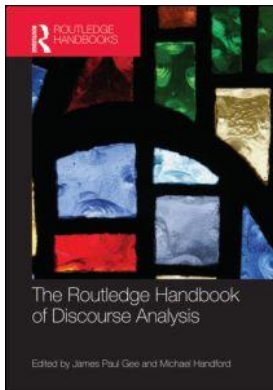
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### Emergent grammar

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# Emergent grammar

*Paul J. Hopper*

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## What is meant by emergent grammar?<sup>1</sup>

The initial premise of emergent grammar is that linguistic structure is a process that unfolds in real time. Emergent grammar therefore moves the focus of description to exemplifying the ongoing structuration of language as events of speech communication unfold. The fundamental temporality of spoken language implies the paradox that structure itself is unstable and intrinsically incomplete, and is constantly being created and recreated in the course of each occasion of use. This view is at odds with theories that presuppose a complete, fixed and stable grammatical system as a prerequisite to understanding and being understood through spoken language, and which view language use as distinct from and secondary to an a priori grammar. In this article I will present some of the arguments in its favor and discuss examples of usage that lend themselves to explanation along emergent grammar lines. I will also discuss the thinking behind emergent grammar that brings linguistics into alignment with current ideas in other language related and social science fields.

Emergent grammar has in the past two decades become absorbed into a general movement that arose in opposition to sentence-level approaches to linguistic structure. Since the opening statement of emergent grammar in Hopper (1987), some of its premises have been incorporated, either tacitly, explicitly, or independently, in other approaches, including conversational analysis (Ochs *et al.*, 1996) and interactional linguistics (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 2001).

Emergent grammar arose in the context of a perceived impasse in discourse and grammar studies in North America. During the 1970s and 1980s, mainstream grammatical theories denied the need or even the existence of language-external motivations for grammatical rules: rules generated grammatical sentences, and sentence-level grammaticality justified the rules. Grammar was autonomous—linguists did not investigate “performance” (what speakers *did* do) but rather “competence” (what speakers *could* do); competence so understood strongly implied that grammar was a self-contained, autonomous system. A leading defender of the autonomy of sentence grammar has been F. Newmeyer, whose view is summed up by Butler (2003: 21) as follows: “What the argument boils down to is this: the syntax of a language is a system in its own right, and in order to specify this system we do not need to (and, Newmeyer would claim, we should not) incorporate explanations of why it is the way it is.”

In the 1970s a functionalist school made its appearance in North America and elsewhere that began to see the possibility for discourse explanations of grammatical facts established on the basis of isolated sentences. At first, this project supplemented rather than replaced structural grammar. Discourse provided an explanation for rules that were needed in any case. Functionalists pointed out many examples of linguistic phenomena that brought into question whether syntactic rules

stated at the sentence level could exhaustively cover all the facts about sentences. Nonetheless, it was often assumed that discourse intruded on sentence structure only in minor ways, such as through the use of particles and sentence connectors, and that “nothing here denies the validity of sentence grammar within its own domain” (Grimes and Glock, 1970: 415). However, the sentence remained the site of core grammatical processes. Questions involving the relationship of discourse to sentences became especially cogent when a complete account of a sentence had to include semantic and pragmatic, that is, contextual, factors—a demand that, by the 1970s, was to a greater or lesser extent required of all theories.

The attention to texts highlights a second aspect of linguistics during the two decades in question: the issue of the appropriate data for the investigation of language. Syntacticians held firmly to individual sentence structure, validated by a criterion of grammaticality. Grammaticality was determined by introspection: a sentence was judged to be grammatical and therefore admissible as datum if the analyst declared it to be so. Introspection—the consultation of one’s own inner grammatical knowledge—provided a ubiquitous and readily available source of data. Discourse linguists wishing to find and contextualize examples of grammatical constructions, on the other hand, were obliged to delve into long texts and count examples. Until electronically stored corpora and high-speed search software became available in the 1990s, doing discourse and grammar entailed working laboriously through book-length texts. Narrative appeared to exemplify the most neutral and concrete uses of language, and much early work along these lines was done on the basis of novels and stories in various languages. Later, precise transcripts of conversations became the standard source of natural language data.

By the mid-1980s a faultline had become apparent between two schools of thought that referred to themselves as *functionalists* (discourse-based linguists) and *formalists* (sentence-level syntacticians). In actual fact, the membership of both of these groups was quite diverse,<sup>2</sup> but a certain rivalry had sprung up, each school attempting to control how the other was to be defined. The alleged goal of functionalists was to replace grammatical rules with statements about discourse functions, indeed to establish that, once all the relevant facts about discourse pragmatics were known, grammatical rules would be redundant. This supposed agenda, formalists argued, was vulnerable to a *functionalist fallacy* (Newmeyer, 1983; Sadock, 1984): the match between sentence form and discourse function must be perfect. It was indisputable that syntactic facts often went in parallel with discourse ones. But functional statements could only successfully replace syntactic rules if it could be demonstrated that there were no autonomous syntactic facts. It would take only one instance of a syntactic fact that could not be replaced by a functional statement to bring down the entire theory.

Functionalists had never stated things in such radical terms. Still, the ongoing debate called for some way of reconciling two extreme positions: (1) grammatical rules were purely autonomous and insulated from discourse factors, and (2) syntactic rules could always be restated as functional principles that were secondary to strategies for building discourse. One response to this dichotomy was in fact already a standard assumption: language was partly functional and partly structural. This position has been restated by Givón (1999) on the axiological grounds that allegedly “extreme” (i.e. consistent) theoretical positions must be resolved through a compromise. Linguists would need to work both ends of the field in order to obtain a comprehensive view of language. But for many functionalists this was an uncomfortable concession, for it left the formalist agenda untouched. If grammatical rules were always needed, functional investigations could be indefinitely postponed, or even dismissed as irrelevant. In effect, there would be no motivation for linguists to study functions: this task could be left to psychologists and sociologists, or to one of the hyphenated fields (and indeed, discourse linguistics was often bundled with “sociolinguistics” in the catalogues of linguistics departments at this time). Moreover, the precise distribution of labor between formal rules and functional principles was never made clear.

Evidently, the problem lay not in the relationship between grammar and discourse but in the concept of grammar itself. Functionalists shared with formalists the standard view that speakers of a language communicate by virtue of a uniform common grammatical system. Disagreement only occurred over the source of this grammar—discourse pragmatics or mental structures. The validity of this assumption, which by some has come to be called the *fixed code* (Harris, 2003) or *a priori grammar* (Hopper, 1988) theory, was rarely questioned; yet, when examined, it was found to be full of paradoxes. One of these was that (as sociolinguists often pointed out) language variation in speech communities was normal and pervasive; how could this fact be reconciled with uniform grammatical representations? Another paradox was that the forms of fast interactive talk—the natural domicile of language—did not in any way resemble the stilted complete sentences of formal grammar. It had often been noticed that formal syntax took written forms as its model. Increasingly in the 1980s linguists began to realize that written language was not, as had previously been assumed, merely a graphic representation of speech, but was a specially developed artifact, whose rules of formation had evolved in exceptional cultural settings. A comprehensive statement of this observation by Per Linell, with the challenging title *The Written Language Bias in Linguistics* (Linell, 2005), arguing that the entire enterprise of linguistics as it had been formulated was derivative of the written representation of language, had been in circulation in an earlier form since the early 1980s. This recognition meant that linguists were obliged to take seriously a thesis to which many had previously paid lip service: the priority of speech over writing. Speech as it was normally encountered did not come in the form of planned solo monologues, but was *interactive*. The back-and-forth of normal conversation with its complexly signaled turn-taking placed quite different demands on theories from those offered by the solitary, thought up, decontextualized sentences that comprised the data of formal grammars.

The 1980s also saw increasing attention being paid to a facet of the study of language that had lain dormant for several decades. Grammaticalization, the process whereby new grammatical forms came into being, had long been the province of Indo-Europeanists and others concerned with historical changes. Interest in grammaticalization had receded before the resolutely synchronic orientation of post-war formalists. It now became a major project of functionalists. The study of grammaticalization pointed toward a more open-ended, diachronic conceptualization of grammar that undermined the synchronic fixed code idea and suggested that some provision had to be made for the fact that grammar was always changing, in fact that grammar was unstable and that the “system” was being constantly updated. In focusing on the interface between structure and usage, grammaticalization opened up the prospect that, if change was a constant feature of language, even ordinary spoken discourse would have to be seen as temporal (Hopper, 1992; Hopper and Traugott, 2003; Bybee, 2007).

Attention to fixed expressions was another theme that began to be developed strongly in the 1980s, in opposition to the idea that arrangements of words were governed solely by category membership, instead of by actual lexical preferences. A number of linguists recognized the important role of fixed phrases and formulae in the construction of discourse (Pawley, 2007 provides a helpful account of this trend). Again, this was not a new idea, but the increasing attention to corpus studies and usage moved it into a more empirical realm. Pawley and Syder (1983) argued that the sort of quick access required by fluent speaking presupposed that much of language is ready at hand in the form of prefabricated expressions. From the perspective of emergent grammar, speakers draw on previous experiences with other speakers in producing their own utterances, in the form of repeated phrases passed around among speakers in comparable social circumstances. These phrases are fragmentary sequences that may or may not conform to the structures devised by standard grammarians. Discourse proceeds by piecing together these fragments into forms prescribed by the norms that govern that particular interaction. These norms

are not rules, but something much more flexible and negotiable. Speakers assemble utterances in the same way that they go through any other routine, in a culturally familiar process that is not precisely known in advance but also not blind, and is guided by the constant ratification of interlocutors.

To summarize, emergent grammar was conceived as an alternative to fixed-code grammar. Fixed-code grammar assumed that grammar logically preceded discourse. Emergent grammar inverted this premise by placing the fact of interactive communication first and seeing structure as a secondary by-product of the interaction. Emergent grammar was a Gordian knot solution to an impasse: since no agreement on the nature of a priori grammar and its relation to discourse is possible, let us *postulate* that grammar is not a priori at all, but is epiphenomenal to the primary fact of communication. Where would the adoption of this postulate lead linguistics? What advantages would it have over a priori assumptions about grammar?

Now a postulate is not a guess, not a mere stab in the dark. The emergent grammar position was supported, and indeed inspired, by much thinking outside of linguistics during the 1970s and 1980s. Later I will discuss some of the contemporary issues surrounding language and social structure that provide a historical and general intellectual context for emergent grammar.

### Grammar from an emergent grammar perspective

When grammar is viewed from the perspective of its emergence in conversational texts transcribed from real time spoken interactions, significant differences from sentence-level grammar are apparent.

First, the grammatical structures that emerge out of discourse do not coincide with those developed from sentence-only observations. So one project is that of reformulating the already existing analyses in discourse terms. Actually spoken discourse is fragmentary and oriented towards the ad hoc communicative needs of the current interaction. The constructions characteristic of preformulated, preplanned utterances are longer, more complete and more consistent in shape than those found in spoken interactions. However, the resemblances between such “canonical” constructions and fragmentary sequences are partial and inconsistent from example to example.

Secondly, these sequences are themselves prelearned. They derive from interactive situations that are themselves part of the speakers’ previous experience. To the extent that they are liberated from these situations, they may possess a certain, very limited provisional cognitive stability and cross-generic usefulness, properties that are sustained by artifacts such as prescriptive grammars and dictionaries and that may be mistaken for fixed grammar and morphology. However, this fixing is itself never uniform across all speakers in all situations. Real language is *distributed* over space and over occasions of use. It may be convenient to ignore variant styles, genres, places, situations, and speaker-groups in describing a language. But, if we are to take seriously statements about “the” language, it must be conceded that the wider the range of phenomena that must be accounted for, the smaller the inventory of forms common across all speech events must become—grammar contracts as texts expand. This fact makes the cataloguing of the entire inventory of rules and forms in a language a futile task. As Roy Harris has put it, we are not entitled to assume “that at any point in the ongoing diachronic flow we can in principle stop and draw up an inventory of the current linguistic facts” (Harris, 2004: 183). This in turn means that a language, and therefore its grammar, are essentially incomplete, a fact long recognized by anthropologists and anthropologically inclined linguists (see e.g. Grace, 1988). The intrinsic incompleteness of grammar is more than merely an inconvenient fact. It changes the nature of grammar, and therefore of the enterprise of linguistics. Emergent grammar is a proposal for “taking the temporality of spoken language seriously” (Auer, 2000).

## Examples of emergent grammar

Since the hypothesis was first floated in the 1980s, a number of linguists have explored its possibilities in descriptive domains. The idea that structure follows rather than precedes ontologically the production of utterances might seem counterintuitive, and so a couple of examples will be presented and discussed.

Consider the well-studied English pseudocleft or *wh*-cleft construction (Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 1387–1389), which is standardly illustrated through sentences like:

What they dislike is the incessant rain.

Pseudocleft sentences consist of an initial clause, the *wh*-clause, and a follow-up clause introduced by *is* or *was*. It is generally held that such sentences are a version of a simpler transitive sentence:

They dislike the incessant rain.

In the pseudocleft version of such sentences the verb (here, “dislike”) is assigned a strong secondary focus, and there is a primary focus on the direct object (“the incessant rain”):

what they `dislike is the incessant `RAIN.

In longer edited texts there is some justification for this analysis (Prince, 1978). However, when conversational discourse is examined, a different picture of the pseudocleft emerges. First, the construction is no longer exclusively biclausal. Instead, the *wh*-clause is used alone in various interactive ways, for example to introduce a new theme, to claim a longer turn or to draw attention to an upcoming significant segment of discourse. The “second clause” (here: *...is the incessant rain*) now turns out to be no clause at all, but simply the continuation of the discourse opened by the *wh*-piece (*what they dislike*). In the following example (from the Santa Barbara Corpus),<sup>3</sup> a teacher named Sharon is talking about ways of dealing with large classes of children, in particular mixed third- and fourth-graders:

- 1 Sharon: well,
- 2 → what you do with those third-graders,
- 3 you know,
- 4 is you just like,
- 5 (H) take them,
- 6 and put them,
- 7 you know,
- 8 with one of the smarter fourth-graders,
- 9 who's very [ver]bal,
- 10 Carolyn: [uh].
- 11 Sharon: and (-) and well-beha=ved.

In line 2, Sharon introduces the theme of coping with third-graders, and then presents a solution. Notice that the follow-up, far from being the single clause required by the pseudocleft of sentence-level grammar, is an elaborate discourse segment. Significantly, there is no logical site for a focused element; instead Sharon has used the *wh*-clause “what you do with those third-graders” as a topic-introducer and launching pad for a recommendation. There are many examples of this sort of thing (e.g. Hopper, 2001; Günthner and Hopper, 2010). They require the standard grammatical analysis of the pseudocleft to be placed in an entirely new light, for the single clause follow-up can now be seen as simply one of a variety of possible continuations from the *wh*-clause. In the following example:

... But what they did bury in that freshly poured concrete,  
was one-inch steel water pipe

the pseudocleft appears in a form similar to that of the canonical pseudocleft, with the double focus on the verb (*did bury*) and the direct object noun phrase (*one-inch steel water pipe*). The speaker, the tour guide at a dam, is addressing the rumor that dead workmen were secretly buried in the concrete. This contrastive use of the pseudocleft, with a simple noun phrase as complement of *be*, is common in longer monologic texts. It is also especially prominent in writing, where the absence of phonetic stress removes the characteristic English means of signaling focus, and in rehearsed spoken texts. It is contexts of this kind that have made the noun phrase complement pseudocleft the prototype for the construction in syntactic studies; but in spoken language it is quite rare, being simply an unprivileged possibility. The biclausal pseudocleft is thus an emergent construction, one that owes its biclausality to a specific kind of discourse context.

Sentence-level approaches to grammar presuppose a holistic, bird's-eye view of a sentence in which the beginning, the middle and the end are apprehended simultaneously. Natural discourse rarely proceeds in this way, however. Discourse is rather an unfolding in time (Franck, 1985; Hopper, 1992; Auer, 2000, 2009; Günthner and Hopper, 2010). We see this in extended utterances like that of Sharon above. She submits her contribution piece by piece, taking care to establish her current utterance with her audience before proceeding to the next. Her previous experience with spoken interactions guides her and supplies her with the means to do this. These means include the appropriate use of *like* and *you know*, and also a use of the verb *take* that works in a way that can only be understood in discourse terms (Hopper, 2007). Semantically, Sharon's *you just like take them* is empty of content in sentence-level terms. But pragmatically it serves to delay the delivery of her main point *put them/you know/ with one of the fourth graders*. The delay serves more than one purpose: it creates a suspension that enhances the focus on the main point; it provides a space for ratification by the interlocutors; and it reinforces Sharon's claim to an extended turn at talk.

It can be seen from this example that the resources of sentence-level grammar are inadequate in either structural or pragmatic terms for the interpretation of the discourse. Furthermore, the total inventory of grammatical constructions in a language is only manifest in real-time interactions, from which they are inseparable, since it is in fact only in interactive discourse that they can *become* constructions at all. Sentence-level structures are only indirect and impoverished reflections of the interplay of linguistic forms that emerge in oral discourse. Under the aegis of emergent grammar, language is viewed from the double perspectives of *interaction* and *temporality*. Sharon's discourse is structured the way it is because she is unfolding it in real time, in obedience to the imperatives of an audience whose ongoing endorsement (manifested here by Carolyn's *uh*) is essential to her ability to go on. Her *like* and *you know* are addressive forms that appeal for ongoing approval and permission to continue. She cannot deliver her speech as if it were a whole and bounded entity, but must offer it to her audience one fragment at a time for their authorization.

However, although she repeatedly renews the bond with her audience, Sharon speaks in confidence that she will be allowed to continue. In deploying the *wh*-clause of a pseudocleft, she at once lays claim to an extended turn. There is an asymmetry to conversational interactions that reflects an unequal power relationship (Fairclough, 2001). Some speakers are entitled to extended turns and some are not. Very frequently we find the use of the *wh*-clause of the pseudocleft to be the prerogative of speakers who in some sense are wielders of local authority. In this case we have a more experienced teacher interacting with less experienced, perhaps younger, teachers. But the *wh*-construction also figures conspicuously in a variety of other asymmetrical scenes: salesperson and client, tour guide and audience, office chief and subordinate, and so on. Grammar is rarely an

innocent participant. It makes its appearance in different ways, in harmony with the endless variety of human interactions, from which it is inseparable. In other words, it is emergent.

### *Incrementality*

Oral discourses are built up out of *increments*, out of which structure emerges as an epiphenomenon (for a recent discussion, see Couper-Kuhlen and Ono, 2007). A crucial difference between the view of grammar as emergent from texts and grammatical schemata as an a priori set of rules and lexical items is that, in the former, speakers and hearers are not seen as referring to anything fixed or preformulated, but rather to something *improvised* (Breier *et al.*, forthcoming), loosely modeling their utterances on utterances previously used and heard, which thereby provide a potential model for other utterances. In effect, each new utterance creates a new grammatical fact. Consider, as an example, Sharon's relative clause *who's very verbal/.../and well behaved*. It might in more literate terms be seen as a restrictive modifier to a head noun phrase *one of the fourth graders*. Yet it is added on to an already complete noun phrase. Moreover, the clause is itself bipartite, with two predicates (*very verbal* and *well behaved*). But these two predicates are not formulated as a complete conjoined single predicate in the way a standard grammatical description would have it: *[[very verbal] and [well behaved]]*. Rather, each predicate is delivered separately in a different turn, interrupted by Carolyn's reactive token *uh*. And, finally, whether the modifier(s) are restrictive or non-restrictive cannot be determined without reference to the specific point in the delivery of the whole utterance at which this determination is to be made. There is a compound predicate here, but it is not preconceived as such; it is present only retrospectively, for the analyst, as a product of Sharon's real-time action in incrementing her first predicate *very verbal* with a second one *and well behaved*. Again, the structure here is emergent.

The degree to which spoken language is incremental in this way is obscured by the evolution of written conventions, with their intricate embedded clauses. The study of discourse in preliterate or newly literate languages suggests that speech in such cultures is performed through the simple addition of formulaic phrases rather than through reference to complex grammatical rules.

### *Projection*

The speaker and the hearer at the leading edge of an utterance have two perspectives: a recent memory of what has been said, and an anticipatory "pre-memory" of what is about to be said. The recovery of a previous referent from a current form—anaphora—is a process familiar to all students of grammar. It accounts for many uses of pronouns, for example. The corresponding forward-looking process known as cataphora has received less attention, as it is much less common and is often considered to be secondary to movement rules. (For example, in *Before he set off for Louisville, John bought a road atlas*, the cataphoric pronoun *he* is allegedly to be understood as an underlying anaphor: *John bought a road atlas before he set off for Louisville*.)

An important methodological concept in the analysis of spoken grammar has been *projection*, the ways in which speakers mold their utterances so that hearers can anticipate and thus prestructure a segment of discourse (Auer, 2005). The idea of projection is associated with the study of spoken language (Liddicoat, 2004). The term has its origin in conversation analysis,<sup>4</sup> where projection refers primarily to the combination of semantic, syntactic, and prosodic resources that alert listeners to the end of the current speaker's turn at talk. The term has been extended to a more general sense, the strategies for foreshadowing upcoming discourse. As such, projection plays a central role in discourse analysis. Without it, utterances would either be detached from a



communicative event entirely, or utterance sequences would be predetermined and devoid of communicative value (Auer, 2005). Projection is what makes verbal communication an open and collaborative affair; as participants develop a sense of where the discourse is going, they can tacitly mold it, allow it to continue, harmonize with the speaker's goals, interrupt it with their own contribution, offer supportive tokens of various kinds, or predict when their turn will come.

The scope of a projection can be local, that is, short range, or more extensive. Short-range projections are quite exact, and they are made possible by idiomatization. The following exchange is quite typical. In it, Doris has told how the air was so thick during a dust storm that the car headlights were green:

- 1 DORIS: ... Yeah.
- 2           they just looked green.
- 3           ... It was a wei=rd.
- 4           .. ugly.
- 5           .. ugly day.

In lines 1 and 2 Doris is winding down her story about the unsettling weather. She then sums up her story with three comments (lines 3–5) that are marked with utterance-final intonation (transcribed with a period/full stop). A standard sentence-level analysis would edit out the intonations and the turn-completions and present Doris's utterances as something like: *It was a weird, ugly, ugly day*.

But such an analysis would miss the point that *ugly* in line 4 replaces *weird* in line 3, and that *ugly* in line 5 confirms the replacement. The two adjectives do not belong in the same noun phrase (NP) because they are doing different work. They come in at different times and with different pragmatic assessments. Yet the indefinite article *a* in line 3 projects the noun *day* in line 5; that is to say, the interlocutor, on hearing *a* (or perhaps the sequence *a weird*), now anticipates the delivery of a noun that will resolve the projection and fulfill the formula  $a^{\wedge}MODIFIER^{\wedge}day$ .

Is there, then, an "NP" [*a weird ugly ugly day*] (Figure 21.1)? The answer to this question is yes, but it is an emergent NP, existing as a linguistic phrase only after the fact of its complete utterance, and retrospectively creating an ad hoc formula [ $a^{\wedge}MODIFIER_i^{\wedge}MODIFIER_j^{\wedge}MODIFIER_j^{\wedge}day$ ]. Clearly such formulae are not entirely novel. They are not thought up *de novo* in every instance. Rather, they are modeled on phrases that are actually remembered in a form that is identical or very similar to previously used and previously heard phrases, such as *a weird day* and *an ugly day*. The mechanism by which this is accomplished is analogy. As was maintained by Hermann Paul (1970 [1901]), analogy is the only mechanism needed to explain both novelty in

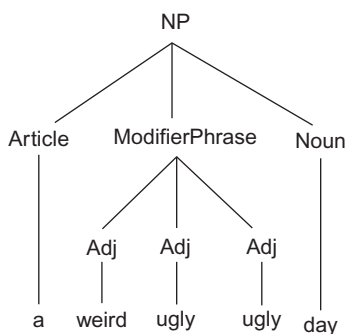


Figure 21.1 The 'noun phrase' *a weird ugly ugly day*

form and successful communication. Analogy also adequately explains projection, in that the anticipation of form relies on familiarity with that form on the part of both speaker and hearer. Familiarity does not have to be precise, any more than routine expectations of any kind between interactants are precise, nor does an experience have to be recalled exactly in order for it to be recognized as a repetition or a variant of some previous experience. But each variant of a formula can serve as the basis for a new formula. Such variants can consist of *substitutions* of words.

### **What key insights about grammar has the decision to focus on the emergent and temporal nature of structure brought to light?**

The emergent grammar theory postulates an inversion of the usual relationship between a rule and a practice, one that is closer to Wittgenstein's analysis in the *Philosophical Investigations*. In this analysis, rather than speakers' practice being governed by rules, it would be more accurate to say that rules are created and sustained by agreement among speakers during acts of communication. "Rather than to say that we agree because we follow rules, it is more perceptive to say that our agreement fixes the meaning of the rules, defines their content" (Malcolm, 1967: 338). "Grammar" has its source in two very general linguistic processes: *repetition* and *routinization*. But repetition is a basic mechanism of speech, the appropriation of the discourse of others. As such, it may take the form of formulas and fixed expressions, as discussed above, as well as of macro-rhetorical moves. But, at a more minute level, repetition includes grammar (syntax) and morphology, which, being involved with essentially every utterance, are constantly being reintroduced into discourse and thus reappear insistently, to the point where they seem to form a necessary, a priori grammatical system. But the apparent system is in fact the result of what Coseriu (1974 [1958]) called the "constant restructuration" of language during usage.

Not infrequently, when even quite robust grammatical patterns and constructions are examined in their detailed discourse contexts, they are found to be not so systematic as they seem in retrospect to be. A good case in point is Chatterjee's study of verbal aspect in several languages (Chatterjee, 1988): the "rules" that are formulated for the use of aspects are seen on close examination to be shot through with exceptions and indeterminacies (pp. 45–55). These cannot be dismissed with the facile observation that "grammars leak"; exceptions do not demonstrate the validity of a rule, rather they call the rule into question (that is, they "prove" the rule—"prove" in the older (Latin) sense of *probare* "put to the test").

Language routines are subject to local cultural norms, that is, they are customs that differ from community to community. Moreover, because grammar is intertextual in a wide sense of "text," some of grammar belongs in the sphere of cultural uniformity. The emergent grammar perspective insists on the essential localness of linguistic forms and understands this wider uniformity as something more accidental and random, originating in small-scale detail, rather than as the overarching *langue* implicit in most other linguistic theories. Of course, there is widespread agreement among speakers concerning useful and acceptable forms of repetition. But, while mass media and standardized education may supply an increasing amount of new language to the wider population, new forms must first be ratified at the local level, in person-to-person interactions. This bottom-up approach to linguistic structure has many implications for well-known phenomena that have been inadequately explained in terms of a basic uniform grammatical system, such as applied linguistics and code-switching (see Linell, 2005). The ability to project upcoming discourse is tied closely to culturally informed expectations. H.-G. Gadamer noted:

“The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the communality that binds us to our own tradition ... Tradition is not simply a precondition into which we come, but we produce it ourselves, inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition and hence further determine it ourselves.”

(quoted in Margolis, 1993: 185)

Projection has profound implications for the study of grammar. Indeed, we might view grammar as precisely the open-ended strategic routines that in certain discourse situations permit inferences about the future course of an utterance to be drawn (by hearers) or made (by speakers). Grammar is emergent because inferences are not rule-like or lexicon-like entities that are preformed and predetermined, and so the relationship between a projected inference and the form of an utterance is always a function of an interactive communicative situation. Speakers understand spoken discourse by virtue of a combination of inferences and familiarity, both guided by previous experiences. Like politics, all grammar is local.

One of the most striking manifestations of emergent grammar is the transitory, unstable nature of linguistic categories. An early study in emergent grammar (Hopper and Thompson, 1984) argued that the major categories noun and verb (NV) were not fixed entities as required by most linguistic theories, but that forms approached full categorial status according to the degree to which they fulfilled their prime discourse functions. For nouns, this function was to introduce a new, previously unspecified participant into the discourse. For verbs, it was to report a new, foregrounded event. Forms assumed the external attributes of noun or verb respectively only as they took on these functions. These attributes consisted of things like case, number, and gender suffixes for nouns, and tense, aspect, and modality markers for verbs. Thus it is not uncommon for nouns to appear in a base root or stem form when they made no specific reference, a situation common for example in English in the first part of NV compounds like *boat-building*, *dog-barking*. Verbs tended similarly to appear in an uninflected form when they referred to an event (as opposed to reporting it), as in *finding a bilingual inscription was an important step*, where *finding* is indifferent to tense, aspect, or modality. But specific reference and eventhood are not determined in advance of the discourse occasions. Again, category assignment is emergent rather than a priori.

Subsequent linguistic studies questioned the fixed status of other categories. The dividing line between definite article and demonstrative was fuzzy in many languages, and indeed in some languages that were alleged to lack a definite article a close analysis of the discourse contexts of the demonstrative showed that in the right contexts demonstratives could behave in ways that were indistinguishable from the definite articles of languages where article and demonstrative were morphologically different (see Laury, 1997, for Finnish; Huang, 1998, for Chinese). Similarly, under some discourse conditions, indefinite articles may emerge out of noun classifiers (Hopper, 1995, for Malay; Tao, 1999, for Chinese).

The principle of emergent structure has been extended from grammar to phonology (Hopper, 1990, 1994; Copeland, 1994; Bybee and Hopper, 2001), lexicon (Bybee, 1998), and semantics (Huang, 1998; Tao, 2003).

### **Emergent grammar in the context of recent language theory**

While the theory of emergent grammar came about in response to a need to rethink the relationship between grammar and texts, this enterprise was not unaffected by completely parallel developments in other disciplines. The reinstatement of time was an especially significant

common factor in this revisionist movement. Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance* (Derrida, 1982) captured the idea of a linguistic sign that is extended over time, and combined the notions of difference (contrast) and deferral (that is, the full meaning of a sign is constantly “deferred” to the next occasion of use). Michel Foucault pointed to the dangers of a too narrow definition of history: “We should avoid thinking of emergence as the final term of an historical development” (Foucault, 1977: 148). Foucault's comment was in line with the idea of linguistic structure as emergent, that is, as being intrinsically incomplete and unfinished; “history” normally refers to longer time spans, but there is no principled reason why it should not apply to periods measured in seconds rather than years. In the second chapter of *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault actually comments on grammar in terms that could be taken to anticipate emergent grammar directly:

Must we admit therefore that grammar only *appears* to form a coherent figure; and that this group of statements, analyses, descriptions, principles and consequences, and deductions that has been perpetrated under this name for over a century is no more than a false unity? But perhaps we might discover a discursive unity if we sought it not in the coherence of concepts, but in their simultaneous or successive emergence, in the distance that separates them, and even in their incompatibility. We would no longer seek an architecture of concepts sufficiently general and abstract to embrace all others and to introduce them into the same deductive structure; we would instead try to analyse the interplay of their appearances and dispersion.

The influence of continental thought was also manifested in an interest in Heidegger and the idea of language as embodied (Fox, 1999).<sup>5</sup>

Another congener of emergent grammar was a group of linguists of the school of Roy Harris, whose ideological basis was an integrational view in which language was an inseparable component of communication rather than a “segregated” system (see Harris, 1998). Although this theory (known to its followers as integrationalism) went further than emergent grammar in refusing to recognize a discrete level of “language” at all, its promoters agreed with the emergentist position in seeing linguistic signs as ontologically secondary to the process of communication.

## Further reading

Couper-Kuhlen, E. and Thompson, S. A. (2005) ‘A linguistic practice for retracting overstatements: concessive repair’, in A. Hakulinen and M. Selting (eds.) *Syntax and Lexis in Conversation: Studies on the Use of Linguistic Resources in Talk-in-Interaction*. Studies in Discourse and Grammar, vol.17. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 257–288).

This is a study of retraction—taking back something one has said. The article, while making a technical point about a single conversational tactic, well exemplifies the ideas, data and methods of conversation analysis. The authors conclude that “constructional formats emerge from interactional needs.”

Weber, T. (1997) ‘The emergence of linguistic structure: Paul Hopper's emergent grammar hypothesis revisited’, *Language Sciences*, 19 (2): 177–196.

Weber places the emergent grammar hypothesis in the wider context of late twentieth-century post-structuralism, citing the deconstructivist school of Jacques Derrida and the idea of the temporal displacement of the sign. He argues that the formal schools of Chomsky, Searle, and others have so far failed to respond to the challenge offered by emergent grammar.

Linell, P. (2005) *The Written Language Bias in Linguistics*. London: Routledge.

This classic work had been in circulation in an earlier form since 1982. The revised and expanded form presents 101 topics arguing in each case when the way of thinking about language in “linguistics” is suffused

with a more or less unconscious allegiance to written forms. Linell notes that emergent grammar supplies an alternative to theories that are grounded in written symbols (p. 217).

Auer, P. (2009) 'On-line syntax: thoughts on the temporality of spoken language', *Language Sciences*, 31: 1–13.

This influential paper, first published in German in 2000, was originally subtitled "Or: What it could mean to take the temporality of spoken language seriously." It presents an empirical study of the emergent grammatical structure of spoken language by using German conversational data. It is important for its method and for its insistence on three essential features of spoken language: that it is *transient*, *linear*, and *synchronous* (i.e. coordinated with other speakers).

Auer, P. and Pfänder, S. (eds.) (2010) *Emergent Constructions*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

An edited volume emanating from a conference held at the University of Freiburg in 2008. The papers illustrate a number of facets of Emergent Grammar focusing on the nature of the interface between grammatical constructions and usage.

## Notes

- 1 I am grateful to the administration of the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) for a Senior Fellowship in 2009 during which much of this article was written.
- 2 The internecine quarrels among formalists of different stripes at this time is described in Randy Harris's book *The Linguistics Wars* (1995).
- 3 Citations of data are from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (Du Bois *et al.*, 2000).
- 4 The prefiguring of actions has been studied under different names. Husserl's *protention*, a counterpart of *retention*, was central to his psychology of time-consciousness. Sinclair and his associates (e.g., recently, Mauranen and Sinclair, 2006) often refer to *prospection*, which is in concept identical to the conversation analysis school's *projection*.
- 5 The parallels between emergent grammar and late twentieth-century post-structuralist thought are laid out in Weber (1997).

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- Auer, P. (2009) 'On-line syntax: thoughts on the temporality of spoken language', *Language Sciences*, 31: 1–13 (translation of Auer 2000).
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