

MICHAEL GRADY. *Syntax and Semantics of the English Verb Phrase*. Janua Linguarum, Series Practica, 112. The Hague: Mouton; New York: Humanities Press, 1970. Pp. 84. \$5.00 (paper).

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This work involves an attempt to show that in the verb phrase two systems are at work, the semantic and the syntactic (or grammatical), whose interrelation has been insufficiently understood (p. 9)

so the reader is led to seek the author's conception of the two systems and their relationship. And since he is asked to read and criticize this study "for its own approach and merits (or lack of them), rather than as it differs from other current theory, of which it is not meant to be an extension" (p. 77), he can approach it without a specialist's knowledge of any particular theory.

The first citation above suggests that the syntactic system is the same thing as the grammatical system, a suggestion which is confirmed by the Terminological Index, where the entry for *Grammar* reads "See Syntax," syntax being defined there as "that aspect of linguistic studies concerned with the order and sequence [sic] of morphs within a sentence." Elsewhere, however, the author mentions "the syntactic system and the morphological system of language" (p. 10) and in the Conclusion he alludes to "various mechanisms, among which are the syntactic, the morphological..." (p. 77), so that one is led to suspect that for the author there is more to grammar than merely syntax. A further ambiguity for the reader is found in the following passage:

In the sections following, it will be seen that a particular speech item is identifiable by its position on two axes: a grammatical form axis and a semantic category axis. For an item to be a language form, it must carry units of both grammatical and semantic meaning. And on a grid of this sort (x,y axes) a point implies both co-ordinates. Or, in a different manner, a speech-form is defined by its grammar and semantics. Thus, if we have the form and its grammar, we also have by implication its semantics. . . . (p. 43)<sup>1</sup>

Because the author here speaks of "the form *and* its grammar" and of

1. In another place where he says "... this sort of analysis, which sees a particular speech form as the result of intersecting grammatical and syntactic categorization. . . ." (p. 76), one can only assume that there is an error and that we should read "semantic" instead of "syntactic."

"grammatical meaning" we are given the impression that he conceives of grammar—and so of syntax—as a system which has to do not with form (or at least not exclusively) but rather with meaning. In itself this idea—that grammar is a system of meaning—is not new nor is it by any means devoid of interest, but it does raise a problem for the reader of this study: how can it be reconciled with what is frequently claimed elsewhere concerning "a rigorous separation of the semantics from the grammar of the English verb" (jacket)? Thus it appears that the author leaves himself open to criticism for not making clear his conception of syntax, particularly in its relations with morphology and with meaning and so, perhaps unwittingly, poses the general problem of the nature of grammar.

In the grammatical analysis presented here the author singles out the function of expressing tense ("the tense-bearer") as that which distinguishes "the true verb," though the reason for choosing this particular element of the verb as the underlying characteristic is not made clear. This omission is particularly grave in view of the fact that nowhere else in the work is any attempt made to define one of its most important technical terms, namely, *verb*. In any case, the choice of this element makes the grammar of the auxiliaries "more regular and intelligible and [minimizes] their GRAMMATICAL differences from other verbs" (p. 18). To see the auxiliaries as verbs is all to the good, but the straightforward application of the tense-bearer criterion leads to an oversimplification by obscuring the differences—not differences of tense—between auxiliaries and other verbs, as when the author suggests that *be* may be "simply 'another' verb" (p. 28) or considers *have* in *I have to go* as an auxiliary. His criterion also leads him to consider all forms but the finite verb (of the indicative?<sup>2</sup>) as nominals in their "external grammar" so that "a species of verb-object relation occurs between *have* and *been talking*" in *I have been talking*, though this is "a verbal relationship, rather than that of true verb to object" (p. 15). If the author is here referring to syntax as form ("the order and sequence of morphs within a sentence") then all he has said is that *been talking* follows *have* as the object follows the verb; if on the other hand he is referring to the syntax of the verb phrase as a system of meaning then the value of his analysis can be appreciated only in the

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2. One wonders how the author would analyze his own use of the subjunctive in "... requires that the infinitive *be* marked" (p. 19), the subjunctive being a finite form of the verb but not expressing tense, as he understands the term.

light of an explicit description of the genus ("verb-object relation") and of its "species" (the "verbal relationship") in terms of meaning. That such a description is not found in the study is not surprising since, to my knowledge, no analyst has yet provided one in these terms. In any case, the practice of naming a relationship and leaving it to the reader to discern its nature (a practice by no means restricted to this study) is hardly a satisfactory one in analysis. It would seem to arise from the failure, noted above, to distinguish the respective places of form and meaning in grammar.

Turning now to the second and main part of this work, the study of meaning, we first remark the frequent emphasis on "the systemic nature of verb-phrase semantics." This of course suggests a fundamental order, a coherent network of relationships in the meaning of the verb phrase, a conception of meaning which quite justifiably leads the author to discuss semantics in terms of

a limited number of root semantic concepts which, by their combination and permutation, are sufficient to explain a wide range of meaning and nuance observable for various 'verb phrases' (p. 76).

This promising approach would appear to be based on the following pertinent observation:

it is inescapable that we use language to communicate, to express meanings, that is; and unless we somehow come to realize [sic] and attempt to deal systematically with the semantic aspect of language, granting it equal or perhaps even primary status to syntax-grammar, I feel we shall remain in the position of considering the tusk, or the trunk, or the leg to be the whole elephant, rather than an important but integrated part of the whole (p. 76).

The point is well made, and, if taken seriously, leads the linguist to assume that meaning, and indeed language as a whole, like other sectors of the natural universe, is orderly and so, by nature, not inaccessible to human reason. He then goes on to observe the inexhaustible complexity of the directly observable facet of language: "there is SOME semantic nuance that is changed (or added) for each time a word is used in each given context" (p. 78). Instead of taking this as an indication of the difficulty of the linguist's task, however, the author avoids the challenge by adopting, curiously enough, the point of view that language is basically polysemous:

In essence, of course, this implies that any morph has no absolutely BASIC meaning, except as one chooses to give it such, arbitrarily for the purposes of analysis (*Ibid.*).

Now polysemy, which basically denies that the various meanings of

some morph can be reduced to an underlying order or principle or system, is in contradiction with the author's original premise, that meaning is systematic.<sup>3</sup> In view of this rather uncertain basis, (either there is a "root" meaning which gives rise to and so is "sufficient to explain" the observable nuances of discourse, or there is not), it is rather surprising to see the author envisioning the possibility of establishing "a universal semantic" which, if not founded on some stable language entity, can hardly be considered to be pertinent to language reality. Unsatisfactory as the author's approach may appear to be, since it stems from two apparently irreconcilable views; it at least has the merit of bringing out the two horns of the dilemma—meaning appears to be ever-changing and yet to have a certain permanence for the speaker—and so to raise the basic question: is the meaning of the verb phrase based on an underlying system or is it not?

Perhaps part of the problem here is that the author's notion of "semantics" is by no means always clear. Like many others he uses the term *semantics* to refer both to "the study of meaning..." (Terminological Index) and to the object of this study, namely, meaning itself as when he speaks of the "systemic nature of verb-phrase semantics" where presumably it is the meaning and not the study which is "systemic." There is, of course, no objection to the use of a term with two distinct meanings (though one may wonder why the term *meaning* is felt to be inadequate to express the second sense) provided that the reader is aware of the difference. Thus in many cases where the author opposes semantics to grammar one understands "meaning" as opposed to "form," but some help should be given in interpreting an expression like "semantic form" (p. 43), which suggests that meaning can somehow be seen as a form. Perhaps here the author has in mind the following:

The point of departure has been that no matter what the meaning of the 'main verb' in such constructions as *I may have been dancing, I may have been singing, I may have been talking*, etc., the *may have been...-ing* frame itself is associated with a particular meaning-construct, created from the association and order of basic semantic categories. And the same sort of reasoning holds for analysis of other 'verb phrase' sequences. (p. 76)

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3. His attempt to justify this "inherent lack of absolutism" in meaning by appealing to the Indeterminacy Principle of Heisenberg is hardly convincing: while this principle does bring out "that at a certain base level, it is impossible to measure exactly, that even the act of measuring interferes with what is measured" (p. 78), this is by no means the same as saying that there is nothing there to be measured (i.e. no "basic" meaning).

Here the "meaning-construct" is a constant and so can quite appropriately be considered as a sort of "semantic form" for what might then be looked on as the "semantic content" which would vary according to the particular "main-verb" chosen. If this is the right interpretation, then the reader is in a position to understand the author's otherwise puzzling distinction between "grammatical and semantic meaning" cited above: grammatical meaning provides a sort of "semantic form" for the other—the lexical meaning of the "main-verb." It is not my intention to criticize the author for hinting at this exciting conception of meaning; on the contrary, he could be taxed rather for not bringing it out more clearly. As it is, the notion underlying the term "semantics," like that underlying "syntax," merits much more probing than it receives in this study.

As a result of his actual semantic analysis the author lists some twenty "root semantic concepts" or "orders" into which he breaks down the meaning of all verb phrases. Since he includes as verb phrases both those begun by modals and those by *have*, *be* and *do*, as well as groups like *have a car* and *(she) is pretty*,<sup>4</sup> there is quite a varied selection of semantic categories: emphatic, conditional, possible, able, expective, obligation, desiderative [sic] for the modals; past, present, future, perfective, continuation, passive for the traditional grammatical categories; possessive and equivalence for *have* and *be*; less and more, categories "of relative degree." This list contributes no new elements to our knowledge of the English verb, and in some cases leaves something to be desired. Thus, for example, to define *continuation* as the category that "expresses the notional concept [sic] of 'going-on-ness'" (p. 46) as in *I am writing* is, at best, to oversimplify. Again, to put "past" and "present" on the same footing as "future" or to characterize *I have gone* as "past" is to ignore the visible morphology of the English verb and makes any talk of "system" in the semiology meaningless. The categories *less*, *more*, and *emphatic* are all listed twice but it is not clear why. A final example: while *may sing* does generally suggest "future," *may have a car* is not limited to "present" as suggested (p. 49); here again there is an oversimplification. In general, the "descriptive grid" is open to two criticisms: (1) each of the categories should be accompanied by (or at least referred to) a searching and detailed description of a variety of "semantic nuance" arising in different contexts, these nuances being the observable facts to which any such general categories are answerable; (2) the relationships between these

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4. For some reason groups with *do* + object, as in *I do my work*, are not included.

categories must be described and shown to be orderly if this is to be considered as a "semantic system" rather than as merely a list. When all is said and done, though the author's approach to meaning and his resulting analysis are in several respects unsatisfactory, his aim—describing grammatical meaning as something systematic—is, in my opinion, praiseworthy.

Insofar as the relation between syntax and semantics is concerned, the author remarks that a semantic unit will "automatically" select the appropriate form (p. 43). More explicitly:

In English, if one wishes to express the notional concept of 'present future' or 'past future' he MUST use the corresponding grammatical form. And if one uses a particular grammatical form, he has expressed a specific type of semantic form. (*Ibid.*)

This suggests that for the speaker there is a necessary link between meaning and form. On the other hand he goes on to say that "Semantics and grammar are independent, but related closely." To avoid being taxed with contradicting himself, it is incumbent on the author to make clear in what respects grammar and semantics are independent and in what respects they are closely linked because they cannot be both at the same time with regard to the same relationship. To clarify this question, which is fundamental to understanding the make-up of a "speech-form," the concepts underlying the terms "semantics" and "grammar" will have to be made more explicit. In this respect "the distinction of internal and external grammar of forms" (p. 15)—that is, "the underlying form/function of a word or construction" and "the gross function of a word or construction" (p. 80)—merits further development. After all, if, besides its relations with other words in the sentence (i.e. its function or external syntax), a word also has an internal grammar, it is only by examining this "syntax" *within* the word that we can hope to distinguish the parts of the word and so understand how the word's internal make-up conditions its functioning in the sentence.

In conclusion, this study does not bring much new light to the actual analysis of the English verb phrase. It is, however, useful because of its approach—it aims at presenting the grammatical meaning of the verb phrase as a system—and because of the questions it raises—the nature of grammar, the two types of meaning, and the relation between grammar and meaning. In this last respect, one cannot help wondering whether the distinction that serves as the starting point for this study, that between syntax and semantics, is after all the most fruitful one.