THE POINT OF DEPARTURE

To the vast majority of us, knowing a language is a simple matter. It means, minimally, being able to understand someone when they speak to you, and being able to speak to them in a way they can understand across a sufficiently broad array of sentences to constitute a reasonable conversation. Yet, in theoretical linguistics in recent times, no such simple answer has seemed possible, for it is taken as incontrovertible that there is no simple correspondence between intrinsic properties of language and its use in context. What this book is about is convincing its readers that the simple intuition is recoverable, while nevertheless sustaining a properly formal account of language. We no longer have to be hampered by the gulf between some abstract concept of language competence and some concept of language performance which is some uncontrollable conflation of linguistic and nonlinguistic parameters: to the contrary, we can establish a view of language capacity as, simply, having the capacity to process language input. Structural properties of language are displayed in setting out the architecture needed to process natural language input. So knowing a language is knowing how to parse it. And production follows the same steps as parsing, with the only difference that the speaker has in mind what they want to say. This is the claim we are going to set out.

The problem that we start from is the accepted wisdom that knowledge of language is quite different from knowing how to use it. The justification for this stance is that language is used in a number of ways — in production (mapping some thought onto some sequences of sound), in perception (mapping a sequence of sounds onto some thought), in expressing our thoughts (which might lack either realisation). The grammar formalism which encapsulates the knowledge of a language that can lead to such realisations must therefore be neutral as between the ways in which it is used. In the light of this order of dependence, it is the concept of language which has to be explained first, independently of any application of that knowledge — the intrinsic properties of a language as set out in a grammar comprising the capacity of some idealised speaker/hearer. It is the applications of the knowledge, then, that have to make
reference to the body of knowledge, and not it to them. So psycholinguists may set up experimental conditions for the study of language use, assuming some given formalism as the background against which tests are designed to evaluate some claimed phenomenon of use relative to some particular theory of language competence; but linguists studying core properties of structural/semantic aspects of language cut themselves off from such data, as a matter of principle. How, you might wonder, can this view ever be shifted? Indeed, why should it? Well, it will take a bit of time, but it does not take much scratching at the surface before the problems start to emerge.

Within the perspective which the current methodology imposes, there are two central properties displayed by all languages; and these pose a recognised major challenge for theoretical explanations of language. On the one hand there is the compositionality problem of how words and what they are taken to mean can be combined into sentences across an indefinite array of complexity. We have various means of saying the same thing, using words in a variety of orders:

(1.1) Tomorrow I must see Bill.

(1.2) Bill, I must see tomorrow.

And any one of these sequences can always be embedded at arbitrary depths of complexity:

(1.3) You insisted I think that Harry, I must interview today and Bill, I must see tomorrow.

On the other hand, there is the problem of context-dependence. Pronouns are a familiar case: they have to be understood by picking up their interpretation from some other term in some sense recoverable from the context in which they are uttered. However, the phenomenon is much, much more general. Almost every expression in language displays a dependence on the context in which the expression might occur. The effect is that any one sentence can be taken to express a vast number of different interpretations. Even our trivial examples (1.1) and (1.2) differ according to who is the speaker, who Bill is, and when the sentence is uttered. The first challenge, then, to put it another way, is to be able to state the interaction between order of words and interpretation within a sentence. The second challenge is to explain how the interpretation of words may be related to what has gone before them, either within the sentence itself or in some previous sentence.

The types of solution for addressing these problems are almost never challenged. The first problem, in all theoretical frameworks, is taken to require a syntactic solution. The second, equally uniformly, is taken to present a semantic problem, only. These challenges are then taken up by different breeds of theoretical linguist: syntactician on the one hand, semanticist (or pragmaticist) on the other. Given this separation, we might reasonably expect that two-way feeding relations between the phenomena would be precluded. Indeed