

KWAKWALA SYNTAX AND THE GOVERNMENT-BINDING THEORY

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“It is no plaything to translate the Kwagot tribes language.”

George Hunt, letter to F. Boas, 31/7/31

Every language poses its own particular problems for a general theory of linguistic structure, but of course the further one goes from those languages on which a given theory was originally based, the more serious these problems are likely to be, and the more likely it is that significant revisions in the theory will prove necessary. For those working on “exotic” languages, indeed, the primary analytic difficulty is often to locate areas of structure that are central to a language in its own terms, rather than confining their attention to those areas that can be conveniently accommodated within some antecedently given theoretical perspective. An important test of the adequacy of a given point of view, taken as a general theory of LANGUAGE (and not simply as a theory of some particular language, e.g. English), is thus that it provide at least a framework for discussing a typologically wide range of languages, and not simply that it yield a satisfying account of a narrowly limited range of language types.

This chapter is concerned with the syntax of Kwakwala (better, if less accurately, known as “Kwakiutl”), an American Indian language of the Wakashan family spoken by (at most) 1000 people on Vancouver Island and the adjacent mainland of British Columbia. Largely because of the monumental work of Franz Boas and his collaborator George Hunt, Kwakwala is often thought to be one of the more comprehensively known languages of

North America. Boas's descriptive work on the language (especially his posthumous grammar, Boas 1947) is somewhat difficult to use, however, and until quite recently there has been little or no investigation of the specifically syntactic problems posed by the language. Emphasis has been rather on its morphology, which for its part certainly merits the attention it has received.

We hope to show here that the language does indeed also have an interesting "syntactic personality," and that although it is very distant in type from the familiar European languages (especially English and the Romance languages) on which most recent views of syntax have been based, current developments in the so-called Extended Standard Theory provide an eminently suitable framework for discussing it. The modifications necessary in the theory in order to accommodate the facts of Kwakwala apparently fall well within the range of parametric variation in a small number of basic principles of linguistic theory. Such variation is what we expect to find at the foundation of differences among languages.

In examining a language of the "polysynthetic" type, the first issue to be addressed is that of the relation between morphology and syntax. Kwakwala does indeed display an incredible richness of word formation mechanisms, leading to a depth and intricacy of structure for individual words which greatly exceeds what we find in European languages. Naturally, these devices bear a major share of the task of arranging the conceptual content of a sentence into its surface form; and in terms of the syntactic theories of not long ago, much of this word formation apparatus would have formed part of the domain of syntax. A theory such as that of Generative Semantics, for instance, treats the internal organization of words in terms of morphemes as simply a special case of the organization of meaningful structural elements into larger constituents. In recent years, however, the development of serious theories of word formation and the lexicon (initiated by studies such as Chomsky 1970, Jackendoff 1975, Aronoff 1976) has led to an alternative view on which word formation is the business of quite a separate component of the grammar (the LEXICON) from the syntax *per se*. In these terms, the morphological wealth of Kwakwala becomes in a way syntactically irrelevant.

Arguably, the domain to be accounted for in terms of lexical formations in Kwakwala is greater than what we would expect of even the most complex sorts of "derivational morphology." Levine (1980, 1981) has argued that "passive" and "raising" constructions which are described in English as instances of NP movement are to be treated in Kwakwala in terms of the relations among lexical items, as argued for (one form of) the English passive by Wasow (1977). Active sentences and their passive counterparts (of which there are often more than one in Kwakwala) are thus described not