Grammatically unacceptable utterances are communicatively accepted by native speakers, why are they ?

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Abstract

This paper aims at redefining the generally accepted notion of unfinished or elliptic sentence, which appears to be crucial in defining in turn the notion of fluency itself. It will be shown that a large part of utterances which a regularly trained linguist would consider as unacceptable and revealing some kind of disfluency of the speaker who produced them, are in fact fully accepted by the participants of a regular verbal interaction. This apparent contradiction will be explained by the fact that linguists base their judgments of well formedness of the utterances on their grammatical structure, whereas speakers interact basically by means of communicative units, which are not necessarily made up of grammatically well formed parts.

1. Introduction

Our basic assumption is that the linguistic aspects of fluency involve two distinct notions, which are generally not distinguished : traditional notion of grammatical acceptability of utterances and a new notion that we will define in this presentation both on interactional and in structural terms : communicative acceptability. Our hypothesis is that many judgments of disfluency about utterances are in fact judgments on grammatical acceptability and not on communicative acceptability.

Indeed, spontaneous speech is not ruled by grammatical acceptability but only by communicative acceptability. That is, the speakers consider as perfectly acceptable communicative acts utterances which are clearly grammatically ill formed. We will give in the first part of the paper some authentic examples of such utterances. In the following parts, we will set up a framework in which this situation will be explained not as the result of some performance disfluency of the speakers but as a natural consequence of the structural properties of language.

2. Examples of successful communication in spite of grammatical ill formedness

Example 1
 cet instituteur a marqué toute ma vie/ et/ je me suis souvent posé la question/ toute   ma vie de penser est-ce qu'il y a encore y en aurait ah je crois qu'y en aurait quand même <u>mais des hommes aussi dévoués parce que il n'attendait <u>rien /ni de mon père ni de moi</u> et ce que je regrette c'est qu'il soit mort trop tôt […]
[This teacher marked all my life and I asked often me this question / all my life to think are there still / would have there

been / oh I think there would be anyway but as unselfish men because he didn't expected anything from my father or from me and what I regret is that he has died so soon]

Example 2
L3   des cabines téléphoniques vous en avez là sur la place ou
L5   ah non non <u>une cabine téléphonique qui serait placée ici</u> parce que nous avons une cabine téléphonique devant la gestion mais c'est le poste de la gestion qui s'en sert (bus E66, 16)
[L3 phone boxes, you have got some here in the square ?
L5 oh no no a phone box which would be located here because we have a phone box but it is for management staff only]

In these two examples, It is hard to see what kind of grammatical function could fulfill the NPs *des hommes aussi dévoués* and *une cabine telephonique qui serait placée ici*. The NPs are located between items like : *mais, parce que*, acting as syntactic boundaries preventing the NPs to be constructed with any governing element.

Exemple 3
 A student is describing the problems she faced, when waitress in a Mac Do restaurant. She has just explained that her job conditions are hard, but she really needs this job :

 .L2   en plus là cette année tu vois j'ai pris un appartement donc il va falloir que j'assume L1   ben ouaisL2   et vu que c'est le seul contrat qui me permette de payer mon loyer L1 ouaisL2 et puis c'est un CDI donc c'est à long terme (Mac.Do)

 [L2 and what is more this year you see I have got an apparment so I will have to go along with that L1 yesL2 ans as it is the only contract which helps me to pat my rent L1 yeah L2 and it is a Indefinite Duration Contract so I will have it for a long time]

It is impossible to construct the subordinate clause introduced by *vu que* either with the preceding context or with the following. In both cases the result is an ungrammatical sentence :
? il va falloir que j'assume et vu que c'est le seul contrat qui me permette de payer mon loyer
? vu que c'est le seul contrat qui me permette de payer mon loyer et puis c'est un CDI
Example 4
Professors in a formal working group are discussing about how to describe a functionality of a software.

L1   mais là il faudrait préciser c'est important
L2   <u>oh on va quand même pas être</u>
L1   ben si   justement
[L1 but here we should be more specific it is important
As far as *être* is a verb with obligatory object, the L2 first turn is an ungrammatical sentence.
We can sum up our observations in saying that in all these examples we find instances of unfinished sentences or ill formed grammatical constructions namely :

 …*des hommes aussi dévoués*...
...*ah non non une cabine téléphonique qui serait placée ici*...
... *et vu que c'est le seul contrat qui me permette de payer mon loyer*...
 … *on va pas être*…

3. Unfinished sentences as performance errors of disfluent speakers

One could be tempted to conclude that these unfinished sentences are due to performance errors, produced by disfluent speakers somewhat awkward in phrasing what they had in mind. One could either hypothesize that their ungrammaticality is linked to the informal status of the speech situation favoring a mere communicative use of language, in which some grammatical approximation could be accepted. But there is evidence against such an analysis. First, we can point out that most of the speakers have high social status or degree of literacy and that some situations are far from informal : in example 1, a high school teacher is telling us personal memories; in example 2, a retired senior executive is negotiating with a representative of the Town Council ; in example 4, the speakers are university staff members in a formal meeting.

From an other point of view, we must notice that these utterances are accepted as perfectly valuable parts of interactional moves by the addressees . They do not provoke any accident in the communicative flew. We cannot notice any reactions, such as clearing up requests, showing difficulties in comprehension. On the contrary, we can find pieces of evidence that the verbal interaction is going on without problems. In 3, for instance, we notice a positive feed back marker *(ouais)* and in 4, the turn *ben si justement* best shows that the speaker must have understood the previous turn as a regular statement in spite of his grammatical illformedness, as far as he expresses explicit disagreement with it. We find no evidence in conversation that such utterances elicit some negative judgments of incompleteness from the participants.

On the contrary, one can find such negative judgments in the metalinguistic comments linguist make about this kind of utterances. Look for instance at this comment of the first example by a French linguist :

"*mais des hommes aussi dévoués* ", "*mais* " est en tête **d'énoncé inachevé** et met ainsi en valeur non pas l'argument présenté mais l'élaboration de l'argumentation."(Lebre-Peytard p.126)

If, according to that comment, the argument would have only been in way of elaboration and not fully elaborated, how could this purpose oriented interaction have gone on ?

So it is the scholars and not the speakers that comment such utterances in terms of deviance or incompletion. We can hypothesize that scholars make such comments because they

analyze informal speech using the tools elaborated for formal written style. In doing so they are unduly projecting properties specific to written style on spoken language structure. Namely, it is because they assume that the basic speech units necessarily obey the structural requirement of grammatical wellformedness, as it is the rule in formal written style, that the utterances appear incomplete to them. Let's now propose a different approach to these data.

4. Unfinished sentences as natural consequences of structural properties of language

4.1. macro and micro syntax : the basic heterogeneous nature of syntactic structure

If we abandon the traditional syntactic framework based on the sentence as structural unit, it is possible to explain in a natural way why an acceptable communication can be conveyed by ungrammatical sentences. Let's suppose according to the framework defined in Berrendonner [1] and Blanche Benveniste [2], that the syntactic component of language is composed of two independent sub components interacting in a modular way : micro and macro syntax. The rules of microsyntax define the wellformedness conditions of grammatical constructions, strictly understood as the projections of lexical heads, the interpretation of which is componential. The rules of macrosyntax, on the other hand, define the wellformedness conditions of other types of units from which an utterance can be built up : the communicative units. Basically, communicative units are defined as complexes of verbal and mimogestual elements interpreted by non componential semantic rules. If we shift from sentence to communicative unit as basic syntactic structural unit, and if we consider that well formed grammatical constructions are one possible but not obligatory way in which communicative units can be realized, we can solve the puzzle : structurally well formed communicative units can be either complete or incomplete grammatical constructions. In such an approach, the output "optimality" constraint stipulating that communicative units are necessarily based on grammatically well formed constructions is no longer a consequence of structural properties of language, but better belongs to a rhetorical component, where it will be described as a feature of formal written style.

4.2. Grammatical wellformedness of communicative units is not a structural property

To better understand the relationship between grammatical constructions and communicative units, let's take the case of an utterance built up from two communicative units according to the basic macrosyntactic pattern Prefix –Nucleus (Blanche-Benveniste [2, chap. 7]). This pattern can be characterized on both levels of form and content.

On the level of form, communicative units are mainly characterized by specific prosodic contours. For French, one can find a overall presentation of the relevant contours in Martin [3]. As it is widely accepted, the prefix is marked by a continuative contour and the nucleus by a range of conclusive contours. These two formal components are associated with two distinct interpretations. The nucleus conveys, according to

its contour, a specific speech act interpretation (basically, assertion as opposed to question and injunction). The prefix sets a frame of conditions of felicity for the speech act, without being itself interpretable as a speech act. A current instance of this pattern is the well known topic-comment structure :

1. (Le piano Prefix)   (les doigts c'est très important Nucleus)
as for the piano the fingers are very important
2. (Le piano Prefix)   (les doigts hou là là   Nucleus)
the piano the fingers … gosh !
3. (Le piano Prefix)(bof (interjection + negative mimic))

In this sub case of Prefix-Nucleus structure, the prefix is an NP interpreted as the entity about which the content of the nucleus is asserted.

We will notice first that in this type of utterances, the prefix doesn't bear any microsyntactic (grammatical) relation in reference with the categories present in the nucleus. The macrosyntactic component is totally responsible of the syntactic "togetherness" between *le piano* and the Nucleus. The macrosyntactic component should not be considered as a supplementary device adding some kind of information structure to already existing syntactic structure : it builds by itself specific syntactic structures Then, it appears that communicative units are not necessarily made up of grammatical categories. For instance, the nucleus part of the utterance in 3 above only consists of interjections or mimics. The only formal feature which is shared by all the utterances 1 – 3 is a specific prosodic pattern. We can hypothesize that speakers rely mainly on the prosodic pattern to recognize that a well formed communicative unit has been produced.

Now, as the preceding examples show that a communicative unit nucleus can be instantiated by no grammatical category at all, we can wonder whether, when some communicative unit is realized by a grammatical construction, this construction should be grammatically well formed. There are obviously instances of this pattern, but, if the two syntactic components are thought as independent means of building utterances, there is no logical reason for this parallel pattern to be the only possible one. It could equally be the case that communicative units are realized by incomplete or ill formed grammatical constructions. And it is exactly what is empirically observed in the utterances judged as showing some kind of deviance : they are perfectly well formed at the macrosyntactic level, which explains that they are accepted as valuable communicative units.

Let's apply this model to authentic "unfinished" utterances :

4.2.1.   Iincomplete grammatical construction as prefix

We can mention for instance this case of grammatically ill formed PREFIX :

 4. Moi je trouve les gens là qui (PREFIX-TOPIC) ben faut les éviter quoi (NUCLEUS- COMMENT)
    |for me, I think , these people here who… well you must avoid them rignt)

The utterance as a whole is a well formed pattern of communicative units as we could see from its prosodic contour, which that can be shown to be basically the same as the one we would have observed if the prefix would have included a well formed relative clause. From the point of view of interpretation, recall that the way communicative units are semantically interpreted is a non componential one (for a detailed analysis of the interpretation process see Debaisieux [4]. Then the speaker gives in some way by the idiomatic use of là an instruction to the addressee to cooperate in inferring from the context the "missing" characterization of the microsyntactically incomplete NP *les gens qui*. The situation is in fact the same as in the case when the basis of inference is an interjection or a mimic (cf 2 or 3). Let's turn now to the examples of section 2.

4.2.2.   Iincomplete or "missing" nucleus

Example 3 of section 2 above can be explained along the same lines : it includes a grammatically illformed communicative unit, namely the nucleus, which is made communicatively well formed by the prosodic pattern. As for semantic interpretation, the "quality" which should follow "*être*" phrased as an adjective is inferred, somewhat as "we are not no be so careful", on the basis of the sequence "quand même pas" which implies a contrast with the positive context "it is important to be very specific".

In the case of example 4 , it seems that it is the entire nucleus that the addressee has to reconstruct. So that the utterance would lack the part assuming the function of speech act. But it should be noticed that a special contour affects generally the prefix in these situations. The contour can be informally characterized as "implicative". This implicative contour acts as an instruction to reconstruct the nucleus from the context and the reconstruction task is helped by some "evidential" mimic of the speaker.

4.2.3.   Complex communicative units with connectives between their subparts

What is to be noticed in the other examples (1 and 2) of section 1, is that, beside the same type of microsyntactic illformedness of some units, (in both examples the underlined part contains a "missing nucleus") they show that a standard connective morpheme (*parce que*) can link together two communicative units independently of their grammatical composition into a bigger unit. A linguist trained to analyze formal written style would declare ungrammatical such complex utterances, because there is no verb to which *parce que* can be subordinate. But in a two level syntactic component there is no a priori reason why connectives should be restricted to link grammatical units at the microsyntactic level. We can logically assume that they function on the macrosyntactic level as well as on the microsyntactic one. In that case, the apparent ungrammatical sequences like *une cabine telephonique qui serait ici parce que nous avons une cabine* in example *2* appears to be perfectly acceptable as a complex of communicative units. From the formal side, *parce que* functions as a macrosyntactic connective, and from the interpretation side, it introduces an argument (there is one phone box but it is not a public one) justifying the assertion conveyed by the preceding prefix nucleus structure in which the nucleus is semantically inferred from the context and the mimogestual attitude of the speaker : " a phone box on the square (it would be nice)". The pattern can be schematized like this :
[communicative unit 1]
 [*une cabine téléphonique qui serait ici*]
 (verbal part + mimogestual attitude)

link
parce que
[communicative unit 2]
(verbal)
[*nous avons une   cabine   mais c'est la gestion qui*
The same pattern can be applied to example 1.
We can conclude that, in all these examples a coherent interpretation can be reconstructed by the addressee from the formal cues given by the speaker. This coherence doesn't necessarily matches with grammatical cohesion : it is nevertheless related to some formal cohesion brought by macrosyntactic patterns.

4.2.4.   conventionalized unfinished contructs

We can bring independent evidence for the fact that incompleteness is a structural property of utterances   in noticing that some incomplete or ungrammatical structures are conventionalized in almost every language up to the point that they are no longer felt as incomplete constructions.

We can mention first instances of "headless" constructions the head of which is to be reconstructed from the context and which should in fact be considered as grammatically ill formed :

Je peux pas, je prefère pas
(I can'r, I prefer not)
Je sais pas qui
(I don't know who)

Thera are also a long list of subordinate clauses without main clauses. Unlike the unrestricted macrosyntactic non verbal patterns analyzed above, these conventionalized utterances show severe lexical restrictions. In French, we can find idiom like uses of some verbs as in :

Quand je pense qu'il voulait partir
Si tu savais ce qu'il m'a dit

These utterances can bear the prosodic contour of a nucleus, instead of one of prefix. This means that there are no longer felt as macrosyntactic complex structures where the nucleus is to be inferred from the context.

The living processes of inference we have described above are frozen here, up to a point that the result of the discourse inference :

If you knew what he told to me (you would be shocked)

has been integrated in the meaning of the idiom : he told me terrible news.

5.   conclusion

As a conclusion we could say that apparently unfinished sentences or utterances used in spontaneous speech with ungrammatical sub parts are the result of the regular use of structural properties of language by the speakers. They have internalized in their linguistic competence both micro and macro system of rules what allows them to rely more or less on the cooperative participation of their addressees in verbal interaction. And consequently to produce more or less well formed grammatical utterances. The degree of microsyntactic completeness is indeed variable according to text "gender". So the same ratio of unfinished sentences will be felt natural in everyday conversation and somewhat disfluent in an explanation. This ratio is sometimes negotiated between the conversation participants. Matalinguistic statements like "you see what I mean" are used to regulate the negotiation, whereas interventions like "would you please finish your sentences" are

always felt aggressive and uncooperative by conversation participants.

The case when participants systematically use well formed utterances can either be analyzed as a will to conform to the written style model or as a kind of reluctance to accept the cooperative nature of ordinary verbal interaction. We could say that the most fluent speakers, in the ordinary meaning of the word, that is, those who speak with complete and only grammatically well formed structures are also the less gifted communicators. It is interesting to notice that second language learners, who particularly need addressee cooperation, are taught to speak with "complete sentences". A certainly counterproductive strategy, in that it prevents the speakers to transfer from their mother language competence their aptitude to take advantage of verbal cooperative attitudes.

6.   References

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