

Semantic and Pragmatic Considerations in Chomskyan Syntactic Theories: An Overview of *Surface and Deep Structure* within Bolinger's *Meaning and Form Model*

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Abstract

*This paper addresses some key questions concerning the syntactic and pragmatic descriptions of Chomsky's *Surface and Deep Structure* and Bolinger's (1977) *Meaning and Form model*. The module of surface and deep structure recommends two levels of representations for a syntactic structure. First, it specifies a surface representation which is the superficial level of phonetic description. Second, a syntactic description also has a distinct abstract deep structure which is semantic in its representation. The module recognizes the fact that one deep structure can find expression in more than one surface structures without any semantic or pragmatic implications. In other words, a single meaning can be expressed through different forms and there exists no one-to-one correspondence between the two. This view, however, assumes a different dimension in Bolinger's *Meaning and Form model*. The model regards a surface structure as semantically compatible with the underlying deep structure and stipulates that any variation within the phonological representation of a sentence will generate a divergent deep structure. Hence, a straight forward account of form (surface) and meaning (deep) relationship that has been observed in Chomskyan syntactic theories must be revisited with semantic and pragmatic configurations. Moreover, the module does not describe the semantic and pragmatic significance of certain syntactic phenomena like pronominalization, deletion, topicalization and comparative structures. The current study attempts to provide cogent, yet not final, solutions to these gaps. The study follows a qualitative mode of research and attempts to provide a theoretical analysis of the theories concerned.*

Keywords: surface and deep structures, *meaning and form model*, topicalization, deletion, comparative structures

Introduction

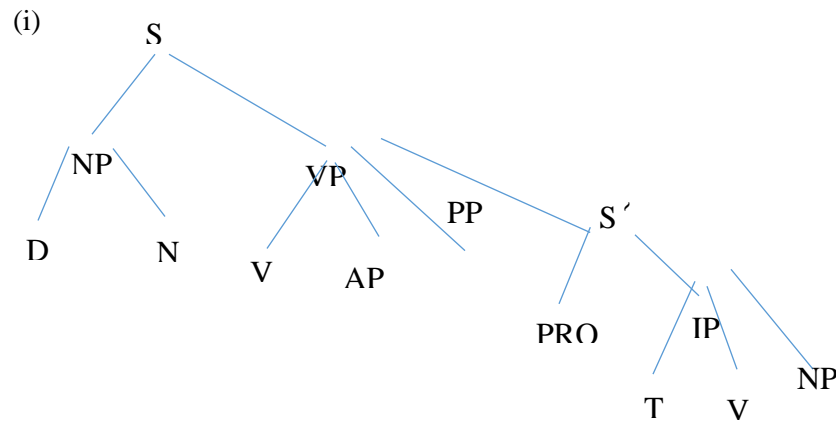
The module of surface and deep structure has a key position in Chomsky's theories of syntax. It manifests the core dichotomy between formal description and semantic structure. The dyed levels of representations wherein the surface structure characterizes the phonetic configuration while the semantic dimension finds recognition in its abstract deep structure is at the heart of this module. Chomsky (1965, p. 125) illustrates these distinct levels of representations through the following examples.

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- 1 (a). “For us to please John is difficult.”
- 1 (b). “It is difficult for us to please John.”
- 1 (c). “To please John is difficult for us.”
- 1 (d). “John is difficult for us to please.”

At S-level, all the four sentences are syntactic variants of the same underlying deep structure: the NP “John” as the recipient of an action “please” that comes from the agent “us.” Sentence (1a-d) share the common surface structure of figure (i).

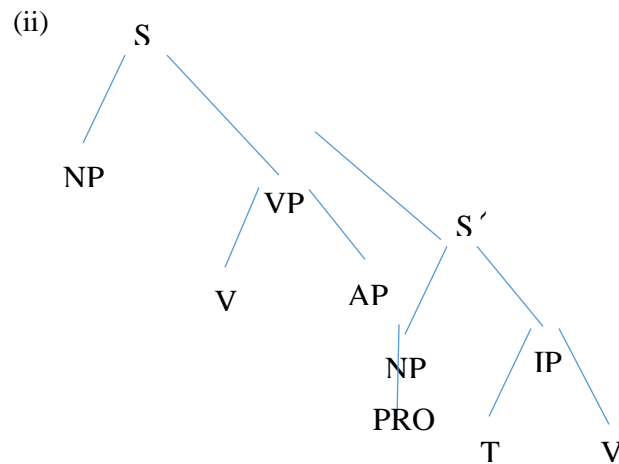


As can be observed in (i), a matrix clause (S) consisting of noun phrase (NP) and verb phrase (VP) and a dependent clause (S bar) which contains a PRO (a null pronominal) and IP (infinitive phrase) forms the surface structure of the sentences (1a-d).

In much the same way, sentences 2 (a) and 2 (b) are the surface variants of each other though they differ canonically in their deep structures (Chomsky (2006, p. 146).

- 2 (a). “John is eager to please.”
- 2 (b). “John is easy to please.”

These sentences can be drawn diagrammatically as (ii).



In (ii), the phonological representation of 2 (a &b) finds expression as S (the matrix clause) plus S bar (dependent clause). The dependent clause consists of a null pronominal (PRO) as a noun phrase and infinitive phrase (IP) which has particle (T) and verb (V) as constituents.

Sentences 2 (a) and (b), however, differ in their underlying deep structures. In 2 (a), the NP “John” is the agent of eagerness while in 2 (b), it becomes the recipient of the verb “please.”

Though the module refers to those grammatical structures which demonstrate similarity in deep structure despite differences in surface structures, yet it sidelines one of the important linguistic principles that a single meaning is not communicable in more than one form. It leaves a few questions unanswered concerning surface-deep structure polarity. These questions have been attempted within the formalism of *Meaning and Form* model in the present study.

Literature Review

Literature abounds about the syntactic description of surface and deep structure module. Chafe (1970) takes the module as an expression of saying the same thing through different formal descriptions. Hence, the

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possible phonological representations of “Who is John?” can be as “my oldest son; my wife’s oldest son, Harry’s older brother; my sister-in-law’s oldest nephew” and so on.

Labov (1972) discusses the relevancy of the module to Black English Vernacular (BEV) variety of English. The surface features of 3(a) are compared to 3(b), but the equivalent construction for 3(a) will find surface representation as 3 (c) in Standard English (SE).

3. (a). “He wild.”
- 3 (b). “He is wild.”
3. (c). “He’s wild.”

His study adds this important dimension to the understanding of surface and deep level representations that BEV speakers delete the copula whenever the SE speakers contract it in the phonological structure of copula “Be.” This, according to him, provides abundant confirmation of Chomsky’s general position that dialects of English are likely to differ from each other far more in their surface representation than in their underlying structures.

Smith (2004) believes that the module brought about descriptive adequacy at the cost of theoretical complications. It also introduced two levels of representation within syntactic description. The term “deep” is logical because it is deemed to be necessary and sufficient for the determination of the meaning of a sentence. Moreover, this level of representation attains great importance because meaning is what everyone is interested in. Later in the theories, Chomsky might have dropped the semantic notion of deep structure, but the allure of the terminology and of the idea, took much longer to dissolve.

Lakoff (2017)[‡] takes the superficial and underlying level of this transformational model as reciprocal and says that the surface structure may not contain elements that supplement the meaning of the sentence. This, however, can be inferred from the properties of the rest of the sentence. Ambiguous sentences illustrate this aspect of the syntactic theory. On the other hand, phenomenon like passivization where in two

[‡] Quoted in Sutton, A. L. (Ed.). (2017).

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different superficial representations of a single sentence that has similar underlying structures supports the evidence that starting from structures with different phonological representations end up with identical underlying meanings.

The conclusion of the discussion is that one meaning can find expression in more than one syntactic form and one form can have more than one semantic structure. Yet, the idea that there exists a close-knit correspondence between surface and deep structure, as we find in Bolinger's (1977) model, has been assigned peripheral significance in Chomskyan module. The current paper investigates these diverse approaches to the syntactic and semantic accounts of surface and deep structure by juxtaposing Chomskyan module with the theoretical model of Bolinger's (1977) "Meaning and Form."

This model focuses on the syntactic forms and their corresponding semantic configurations. It premises those two diverse forms are unlikely to suggest similar semantic patterns. This means that a monolithic syntactic description cannot lead to dyad semantic descriptions. One form conveys one type of meaning only and any change in the form actuates a change in meaning. This important linguistic principle does not find a systematic description in Chomskyan module.

Research Methodology

The study follows a qualitative mode of research. It has selected data from Chomsky's theory of Surface and Deep Structure and has analyzed it within Bolinger's semantic model of "Meaning and Form." Since the study deals with theoretical linguistics, qualitative methodology, therefore, has been applied in order to come up with some conclusive arguments about form and meaning relationship.

Discussion

This section discusses the semantic and pragmatic considerations of Surface and Deep Structure module. The discussion has been subcategorized into different sections each focusing on a distinct aspect of the module.

Bolinger on Surface and Deep Structure

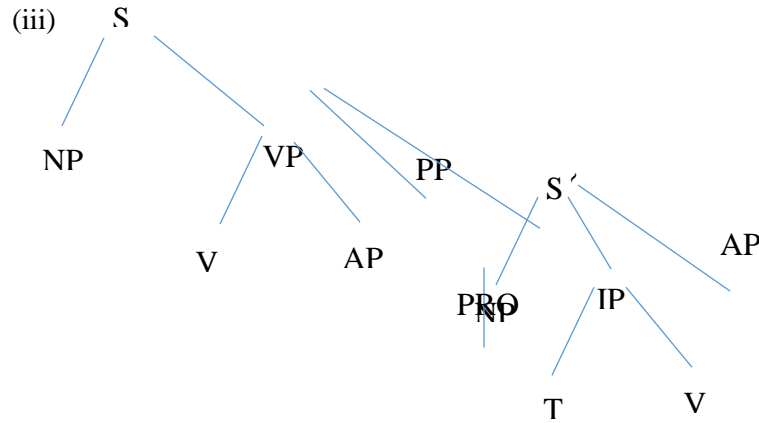
Bolinger (1981) takes surface structure as the syntactic variant of deep structure that is recognized through the process of transformation.

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The generated form, however, may not be a semantic replica of the syntactic structure. A syntactic structure which is recognized by more than one superficial deep level of representation is highly defective if it is studied along basic principles of semantics and pragmatics. In fact, the counter argument of one form for one meaning is more compatible to the linguistic theory and can be supported with ample empirical evidence. Chafe (1964) follows the same view when he observes that a single surface structure with two diverse deep structures may be “similar,” but not “identical” (p.88).

Whereas Chomskyan module treats surface structure as auxiliary, the “Meaning and Form” allocates central position to it. It is not just the deep structure that embodies the meaning of a sentence but the surface structure itself can describe the meaning of a structure.

As an illustration, we can take the following infinitive structures that share similar surface structures of figure (iii):



4 (a). “It was foolish for John to go there.”

4 (b). “It was foolish of John to go there.”

4 (c). “John was foolish to go there.”

Apparently the three sentences suggest the foolishness of John, but Bolinger (1977) believes that the three are characteristically different and are preferably used in different discourse contexts. In 4 (a), the AP “foolish” acts as NP modifier “it” which signifies an abstract proposition and that is of “John’s going there.” Sentence 4 (b) is dyad in its condemnation of NP “John” and the VP “John’s going there.” In 4 (c), the AP “foolish” exclusively modifies the NP “John” and implicitly modifies the action of “going there.” This inference about the action is quite logical

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because contextually a stupid person is expected to carry out stupid actions.

Similarly, plausible answers in response to question (5) can take the following forms. These responses 6 (a-e) will be described as different surface representations of the same deep structure in Chomskyan module.

5. "Could you call me?"

6 (a). "No, I will not call you."

6 (b). "No, I won't call you."

6 (c). "No, I will not."

6 (d). "No, I won't."

6 (e). "Not this time."

Sentences 6 (c-e) are unmarked structures and the expected patterns in such situation. 6 (c) and 6 (d) differ in the contracted and uncontracted auxiliary "will," the former form is preferably used in informal discourse context as Maurice and Freeman (1983) believe. The latter –the uncontracted form—is preferred in formal discourse context. The long forms 6 (a & b) are marked and imply that the speaker intends to be discourteous. Such structures are markedly used in those situations when the speaker wants to ridicule the dullness and mediocrity of the hearer implying that he is a pretty dunce.

Deletion and Pronominalization

Bolinger (1977) takes deletion and pronominalization as the agents of change. These phenomena modify the underlying deep structures of the constructions and lead to different semantic dimensions. In the following pair of sentences, 7 (a) specifies the list of purchased items while 7 (b) suggests that her purchases were more than the expected range.

7 (a). "She bought a red dress, a green one, and a blue one."

7 (b). "She bought a red dress, she bought a green dress, and she bought a blue dress."

This difference in the semantic configuration of 7 (b) happens because of retention of pronominals and the deletion of them in 7 (a). Similar observations can be made about the following sentences.

8 (a). "John came in the room and turned off the lights."

8 (b). "John came in the room and he turned off the."

The two events in 8 (a) are sequential: John's coming into the room is followed by turning off the lights. The same sequence, however, cannot be observed in 8 (b). In this case, the turning off the lights is something that is most probably done as a response to leaving the lights on and subsequently is carried out when it is complained about.

The omission of "to-infinitive" marker also results in different deep structures. In 9 (a), the omission of "to" marker in the second clause may be taken as monolithic ability of reading and writing a letter. The same interpretation cannot be lent to 9 (b) which foregrounds two different activities of reading and writing letters.

9 (a). "John is able to read and write letters."

9 (b). "John is able to read and to write letters."

A sentence with or without "to" infinitive structure provides different interpretative frameworks as evident in the following examples.

10 (a). "Do it if you want to."

10 (b). "Do it if you want."

10 (a) signifies the wilful fondness of the speaker while 10 (b) shows the willingness of the speaker.

The same semantic patterns are observable in cases where the nominals are repeated[§].

11 (a). "John wants to eat my soup but John isn't going to get the chance."

11 (b). "Mary says so but Mary is wrong."

[§] The unmarked form of the structures 11 (a) and (b) will be written with "he" and "she" respectively.

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Sentences 11 (a) and (b) violate the principle of Pronominalization ** but the sentences have not been marked ungrammatical. This repetition of nominals “John” in 11 (a) and “Mary” in 11 (b) carries admonitory effects. They are marked structures favored in situations when the speaker intends to sound admonish.

Similar observations hold for the following structures wherein the addition and deletion of the complementizer “that” attains pragmatic significance.

12(a). *Who do you think that will be questioned first?

12 (b). Who do you think will be questioned first?

Carnie (2000), p. 16) believes that complementizer “that” assumes optional dimension when “who” functions as the object of the sentence. This explains the unacceptability of 12 (a) wherein “who” features as the subject.

For Bolinger (1977, p. 11), however, “that” is not added when information is volunteered. Hence, if John is asked 13(a), he will say 13 (d), not 13 (c).

13(a). “What’s the weather for tomorrow?”

13(c). *“The forecast says it’s going to rain.”

13(d). “The forecast says that it’s going to rain.”

Topicalization

** This principle, according to Ross (1967), disallows the repetition of the same nominal in the embedded clause.

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The following two sentences 14 (a) and (b) will be treated as syntactic variants of each other in the module of surface and deep structure without emphasizing their semantic and pragmatic considerations.

14 (a). "The dawn came."

14 (b). "Came the dawn."

Chomsky (1965) takes such constructions as examples of topicalization. Topic is a constituent in the surface structure which is directly governed by "S." Comment comprises of the remaining constituents of the sentence. For Palmer (1987, p. 18 & 227), such constructions manifest inversion of adverbials, thereby construing inverted structures. The same phenomenon of adverbial inversion is evident in 15 (b) given below.

15(a). "John walked into the room."

15(b). "Into the room walked john."

Bolinger (1980) interprets such inverted structures as structures demonstrating limited transformation. Moreover, the proposed adverbials may safely be called topicalized constituent. A sentence embodies within itself a topic-comment relationship in its syntactic configuration. The transformed structure with its proposed constituent definitely changes the phonetic representation of the sentence and hence ensues a diverse deep structure. The preposing of a word is carried out with the purpose of making it the topic of the sentence. Hence in 16 (b), the NP "the train" receives more focus which the unmarked structure 16 (a) will lend to "John."

16 (a). "John never rides this train during rush hours."

16 (b). "This train John never rides during rush hours."

The OSV pattern of 16 (b) is SVO at the deep level. The preposing of the NP "the train" transforms the surface configuration of the sentence, and to quote Bolinger (1981), the transformation of surface structure changes the semantic interpretation of the sentence making it object focused structure that will be more acceptable in a context wherein the "the train" assumes new information as Chafe (1970) states in his theory of Information Structure. Sentences 15 (a) and (b) follow the same semantic paradigms and should be interpreted within adverbial focused

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dynamics. Fabb (2002) also perceives such transformed constructions as emphatic structures. The topicalized constituent disturbs the information structure of the sentence and the constituent that carried old information is fronted to make it convey new information.

Bolinger (1981, p. 93) further illustrates the relativity of surface level to deep level by giving the following examples.

17 (a). “The president came.”

17 (b). “Came the president.”

Sentence 17 (a) is an unmarked structure with SVO pattern but 17 (b) is a marked construct that follows VS syntactic paradigm. The deep structure of 17 (b), according to Bolinger (1981), does not conform to the deep structure of 17 (a). The second of these two with a proposed verb and postposed NP is favorable in those contexts when the arrival of the president is out of the blue. In other words, this pattern is observed in dramatic situation where the action attains more significance than the subject. This dramatic effect in part will also depend on the scene that has been set for the appearance of the president.

These inverted structures are also determined by the type of verb used in the sentence.

18(a). “Up stood the witness.”

18(b). * “Up gave the task.”

The ungrammaticality of 18 (b) shows that adverbs used in idiomatic sense cannot be preposed while adverbs that are literal in its meaning can undergo topicalization. This exclusion of adverbs carrying idiomatic meaning can also be seen in 19 (b) which disallows the fronting of adverb “down.”

19(a). “The car broke down.”

19(b). * “Down broke the car. “

Furthermore, inversion is not done in case of indefinite NPs (“a ship” in this case). This explains the unacceptability of (20).

18. * “Away sailed a ship.”

Maurice and Freeman (1983, p. 501) in their discourse study of “Degree—Comparatives and Equatives” discuss the semantic difference in the following constructions.

20(a). “John is taller than Bill.”

20 (b). “Bill is shorter than John.”

20 (c). “Bill is not as tall as John (is).”

Sentences 20 (a), (b) and (c) seem to share a common deep level conveying the idea that the NP “John” has greater height than the NP “Bill.” The three, however, are markedly different in their surface representations. Sentences 20 (a) and (b) are syntactically affirmative structures but semantically negative polar structures. Such constructions are considered blunt and more direct than the negative equative 20 (c) which is stylistically more tactful and polite. Such structures show some regard for the listener and carry positive polarity in certain discourse contexts.

Conclusions

The conclusive arguments that the study adduces are that a syntactic structure is formed with the purpose of conveying its semantic description. Any variation in the superficial representation of a sentence actuates a transformation not only in the syntactic dynamics of the sentence, but also accounts for a different semantic dimension. A single surface structure may be recognized as containing more than one deep structure. Moreover, the module of Surface and Deep structure disregards the semantic and pragmatic significance of certain syntactic structures such as pronominalization, deletion, topicalization and comparative structures. The deletion or the retention of a pronominal or a complementizer “that” in a syntactic structure leads to different semantic description. Likewise, there are different semantic and pragmatic implications of a topicalized constituent and of comparative structures. It is primarily due to this that Bolinger (1977) recognizes the module of Surface and Deep structure as inconclusive and believes that it has failed to consider all aspects of syntactic theory. Its significance, however, cannot be sidelined with regard to some dimensions of syntax.

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