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Focussing on Revealing English Grammar's Conceptual Unity Amidst Its Operational Diversity

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Abstract: This paper is the first and only successful attempt at identifying and illustrating clearly the underlying *nature* of English. The thesis presented herein is that English is obsessive in its thrust to sacrifice conventional constraints in order to maximize its operational flexibility. Operational flexibility is defined as a modest set of procedures that enables speakers of English to facilitate their communications, with ease. In other words, blind adherence to societal or grammatical constraints is not congruent to the nature of English. In fact, English operates in a manner not unlike the Artful Dodger character in Dicken's *Oliver Twist* novel. While both parties (the Dodger and English) adhere to accepted conventions, there are times when both parties can be seen to undertake breathtaking divergence from those norms, turning their divergences into an art form. For its part and not seeking to pick a pocket or two, this paper reveals that the English determination to maximise operational flexibility drives it to *Repackage* — at all grammatical levels. These are syntactic (sentences), morphemic (words), phonemic (letters) and morphophonemic (word with attached letter) levels. Repackage is defined as giving its structures multiple uses. Because repackaging has remained undetected for so long, it would seem to infer an almost hidden subtlety of English. The methodology used herein is to provide an across-the-board suite of uncluttered exemplar sentences, which cover all grammatical levels. These exemplars are accompanied by inline explanatory commentary which is intended to fully inform ESL Teachers about the *nature* of English. But English is not secretive. The exemplars show that the *nature* of English was always hidden in plain sight, awaiting recognition and identification.

Keywords: English Grammar, ESL Educational Practice, ESL Curriculum Redevelopment, ESL Teaching, Second Language Acquisition

1. Introduction

This paper claims to be the first successful attempt to discern the nature of English. There was one other, albeit a failed attempt. Against a background of trying to account for the rising growth of English as a universally used language, Wrenn claimed that there is a list of characteristics which portray the nature of English [1]. Expressed in critical thinking terms by Hamby [2] and Vardi [3], Wrenn's willingness to inquire can be described as one of the cardinal critical thinking virtues.

In Wrenn's ordered listing [1], there are five features which reflect the nature of English. These are: Receptive and adaptable heterogeneousness; Simplicity of inflexion; Relatively fixed word order; A growing use of periphrases; and finally, Intonation development. However, the advocating of a *list* does create a problem of credibility. Is it

true that English is overly blessed with characteristics, or is it more likely that Wrenn's analytical endeavours went askew? In spite of his goodwill, in an attempt to manage his list of characteristics, and with a view to identifying a single paramount feature – or, in other words, the single feature representing the essential nature of English, which this paper prefers to reduce to simply the *nature* of English – Wrenn first chooses Heterogeneousness but almost immediately self contradicts by vacillating between Heterogeneousness and Simplicity in league.

Given Wrenn's sharp stumble [1], a closer examination of each feature in his list is in order. Wrenn's main theme in his first feature, Receptive and adaptable heterogeneousness, concerns borrowings, which he notes began in the fifth century and have since continued. Today, it is widely known that English borrowed huge numbers of words, with estimates that perhaps eighty percent of the lexicon are

borrowed words. While he correctly identified an ongoing trend, it is unclear as to why Wrenn implies that normality is to borrow but not to adapt? It seems folly to think that the *external* process of borrowing precludes an *internal* process of adaptation.

Wrenn's main theme in his second feature, Simplicity of inflexion, concerns a comparison of differences between continental European classical languages and English. While classical languages have kept case endings on nominals, as well as having verbal systems that also excel in complexity, English has taken a route towards simplicity. Even though Wrenn might not have intended it, the mention of a lack of complexity is sometimes construed to be an indication of an inferior language, although it would seem that English has not had to endure such snobbery perpetually.

Moving to Wrenn's third feature, Relatively fixed word order, the main theme concerns English speakers relying on the *ordering* of words to ensure correct identification is transmitted. By adding 'relatively' as a qualifier, Wrenn did not mean that English has unfixed word order, but his curious inclusion of 'relatively' does infer English is a language with a degree of chaos in its sentences. This claim comes as a surprise because reference to disorderly wording is not found in the writings of other grammarians, whether they pre-dated [4-5], or post-dated [6-13], Wrenn's paper. Indeed, neither is reference to disorderly wording a feature of Mitchell's treatment of Old English [14], which is the precursor language to Middle and Modern English. Nor is the topic of disorder found in the writings of English phoneticians [15, 16]. In defence of English, it must be stated that there are two grounds for the dismissal of Wrenn's somewhat misinformed view that English sentences exhibit potential chaos. The Taxonomy premise [17], as well as the Focus Promotion premise [18], both provide grounds for dismissal, and a brief discussion of these premises is undertaken next.

In formulating his taxonomy of world language structures, Greenberg proposed that all the world's languages deploy words into sentences which exhibit three construction zones [17]. These are the Subject zone (S), the Object zone (O) and the Verb (V) zone. Although there is a mathematical possibility that six zones can be achieved, in practice three organizations account for almost one hundred percent of languages. For languages that like to co-locate their nominals (those acting out an action, and those being acted upon by an action), the two types of construction are SOV and VSO. The largest of these types (by language count, not necessarily by speakers) is SOV in which the verb action is treated after nominal zones have been filled, and is typified by Japanese. The second type of construction, which is VSO, is to treat the action being undertaken prior to filling the nominal clusters, and is typified by Arabic. However, only a small percentage of languages, as important as they are nonetheless, have taken this VSO path.

The final construction type is SVO which is a path that has been taken by many languages, including English. No sense of superiority of English is intended, over other languages, by saying that SVO seems to be a balance between the other two organizations – but that does not infer it is more efficient, just different in type. Languages in an SVO organization are determined to separate the nominal zones from the verb zone. This may mean that ESL speakers, who come from either of the other two organization types (SOV and VSO), may feel challenged to construct a nominal zone, only then to defer to a verbal zone, only to return to construct a final nominal zone in order to create an utterance. If the previous statement is true, and if it retards student effort, then is that circumstance sufficient ammunition for students to be informed by having an understanding of English nature?

Returning now to the defence of English as regards Wrenn's curious statement that English sentences might be in a state of only being 'relatively ordered' in structure [1]. Such a statement seems to contradict the validity of Greenberg's premise on construction zones [17], and organizational types. If taken at face value, it is tantamount to claiming that all SVO languages are deficient, and this claim would refer to a figure in the realm of forty five percent of world languages. That situation must be deemed as most unlikely.

If accepted as valid commentary by Wrenn [1], his 'relatively ordered' statement would also be at odds with the Focus Promotion premise [18]. This premise demonstrates that a declarative sentence can be transformed into any other sentence type, say for example passive voice, via a simple yet systematic process at all times. In that premise, Focus is defined as changing a sentence's prominence (aptly named as the Focus; but also constituting the rationale) by moving one or more words in a right-to-left movement, from their placement in the Verb or Object zone, into the Subject zone (the Promotion destination). In the context of this paper, the movement constitutes an instance of *repackaging*, which is a theme discussed in more depth below.

Wrenn's main theme in his penultimate feature [1], Use of periphrases, concerns a claim that non-precise expression typifies English utterances, with an inference that using too many words would describe a person or a language as verbose. Wrenn notes that, on the contrary, classical languages can use fewer words to express a sentence that would take more words in English. While he may be correct about word count differences, such a view glosses over the cost of constructing more grammatically complex words.

In his final feature, Intonation development, Wrenn's main theme concerns the act of placing stress on a word. Although some parts of each of Wrenn's feature have been problematic, this claimed feature is perhaps more problematic that those already discussed. This is because all languages are likely to make use of stress; and because Wrenn gives examples of non-systematic, ad hoc usage of intonation. His examples appear to be insufficient to support an argument that intonation can distinguish English as a language in the same manner that tones distinguish languages like Thai, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Burmese, Laotian, Cantonese and Mandarin, which appear to non-tone speakers as a pleasantly surprising way to organize units of communication.

But, it must be asked, how could Wrenn so muddle the task [1]? On critical thinking theory [2], Hamby clearly states

that possession by an analyst of a single cardinal virtue, however admirable, is not sufficient to guarantee success. He makes the point that the virtue must be accompanied by an appropriate skillset of "reasoned judgement" [2], p. 77. On this point, perhaps Vardi's summary is more informative in stating that a key principle is being 'methodical' [3], p. 200, and a key action is to 'follow the trail of evidence' [3], p. 200. Wrenn's critical thinking virtue seems to have been over-trumped by an absence of this critical thinking methodology, and thus needs no further referencing, apart from one final observation, which follows.

Although Wrenn's laudatory attempt was unrequited in that it produced generalisations rather than specifics [1], Wrenn's willingness to conduct research on the nature of English, in a *generalised* manner, validates this paper's willingness to conduct research on the nature of English, in a *specific* manner. This move away from Wrenn's approach is better aligned to critical thinking [2-3] values. Therefore, this research should prove beneficial to ESL teachers, and hence to their students ESL success rates.

2. Discussion

As a starting point in searching for the source of the nature of English and its subtlety, it is conceivable that the genesis of modern-day English can be found in Old English which was the language used in fifth century England following invasions by Angles, Saxon and Jutes [14]. Therefore, this paper proposes that the starting point for revealing the nature of English lies in acknowledging its debt to, and continuation of, earlier forms. Ironically, this same starting point was available to Wrenn and, if used, could have benefitted his analysis steps.

Having identified a specific point, the next question that arises is: where to start looking? Should a search begin with complex structures, say sentences; or, with simpler structures? In answer, when reviewing the morphophonemic structures of *demonstrative* pronouns (this, these, those), there is noticeable similarity between Old English [14] and today's English [12, 20-22]. Therefore, this paper takes as a starting point the thesis that today's English is endorsing and continuing the nature of Old English.

Having pinpointed a starting point, the ensuing task is to take a position on how English conceptualises its demonstratives. While each demonstrative is constructed as a vowel sound within a repeated consonant structure (these, those), does this indicate a *convention,* such as 'use different vowels to indicate plurality'; or, is the alternative more likely that demonstratives are just one *instance* of using vowels to make a differentiation, here between grammatical number as well as semantic distance. If *convention* were to be chosen as the answer, then developing a matching explanation would pose a difficulty in interpreting vowel usage in non-demonstrative words, such as 'goose, geese'.

Since English cannot be seen to be courting *convention*, then it must be seen to be continuing just one *instance* of using vowels. If the latter explanation is correct, as this paper deems

it to be, then English nature must be seen as the subtle manner in which it minimizes the constraints of convention in order to maximize operational flexibility. This observation means that English can no longer be viewed as consistently inconsistent.

But it has been said that 'one swallow a summer doth not make', to rephrase others, so should full credence be warranted from an interpretation of just one low-level structure. Fortunately, and now moving to a higher level structure, it can be seen from the Focus Promotion premise [18], which reveals on ordered sentence construction process, that the nature of English is to minimize the constraints of convention inherent in Greenberg's Subject-Verb-Object premise [17], with a view to creating multiple *instances* of sentences, thereby maximizing operational flexibility.

But, is maximizing flexibility as an explanation of the nature of English too simple? The fact that native speakers of English come to fluency at a childish age, suggests that the nature of English must be simple and, furthermore, must be hidden in plain sight. Based on this probability, it is reasonable to suggest that a simple nature is likely to exist and, to give it a descriptive name tag, it might well be named the English *Repackaging* nature. This paper takes the position that *many* instances of repackaging exist and these instances are known by a variety of names, all of which have suffered the indignity of never being recognised as constituting a constellation. Possibly unnecessarily complicating ESL learning success, each of these instances is usually known as a process, and a description of each process is provided in the Findings sections below.

Part of the motivation for this paper is a belief that this new discernment of the repackaging nature of English represents a fresh approach which could be congruous with assisting student learning autonomy, as espoused by Benson [19], especially given that this fresh approach aims to link concepts together. Having said this, there is no criticism of the range and depth of help provided by existing explications. See, for example, the efforts of Christison [20], Cohen [21], Dornyei [22].

In terms of Teaching and Learning theory, but also constituting a small part of the rationale for this paper, it is hoped that this paper's integrated overview of the nature of English will function to assist ESL learners to form, according to Brunner's theory of scaffolding [25], essentially a coat-hanger in the mind upon which a silhouette of English can be formed and then be built into a corpus of useful as well as immediately available grammatical knowledge and confidence.

3. Methodology

This paper's approach to locating and describing the English *repackaging nature* is done through an organized presentation, and discussion, of exemplar sentences, each of which demonstrates palpable evidence of the English nature of repackaging. Presentations are organized into syntactic, phonemic, morphophonemic and morphemic sections, some of which are broken into sub-sections. This methodology is

favoured because it allows English nature to speak for itself, and such methodology has proven successful in earlier publications [18, 23-24, 26].

4. Findings

The following sub-sections comprise of a number of exemplar samples, whose purpose is to demonstrate the English nature of repackaging.

4.1. Phonemic (Letter) Exemplars

In a phonemic example, when an inner letter of a word is transformed into a different letter, this instance of repackaging has been called Vowel Alternation and can be applied to forming nominal plurals ('woman, women'). Additionally, Vowel Alternation can be seen to be at work with demonstrative pronouns which function to indicate distance, such as 'these, those'. Another Vowel Alternation instance of repackaging can be applied to forming past tense verbs, as in 'sing, sang'. Instances of such vowel level repackaging now follow.

Neither this (ðɪs) book nor any of these (ðiz) letters are interesting to me.

It might not be immediately obvious that 'this' and 'these' are an instance of repackaging in the same shell. The shell is TH-S, in which TH is written as a digraph but is pronounced as a single sound. But of greater interest is the internal vowel encased in the consonant shell. Therein, the vowel is pronounced as a sound of short length in the first instance, but as a long sound in the second instance. While the short vowel infers grammatical singularity, the long vowel infers grammatical plurality of its accompanying noun. By convention, the topic words also carry a semantic sense that the mentioned item(s) are being deemed to be located close by.

By way of explanation, the words in brackets are written in a script known as International Phonetic Alphabet, or simply IPA. Even though IPA has its uses, it also has limitations and does not easily show which vowels are long. The normal alphabetic script is kinder by providing a trailing but unpronounced vowel (for example, the final '*e*' of 'thes*e*') to indicate the previous vowel should be lengthened. This clue may not be foolproof but the spelling system intends it as a simple guide.

A further instance of repackaging at vowel level follows, but this time featuring Vowel Alternation in a nominal, rather than as previously exemplified with a demonstrative pronoun.

My sole goose is on the loose, even though your geese may be at peace.

The exemplar sentence above shows an instance of plurality formation, using Vowel Alternation. The internal vowel moves from signifying a singular topic ('goose'), to plurality of topic ('geese'). It must be acknowledged that there is not a huge pool of nominals in which vowel alternation is able to take place.

Native speakers often take for granted the elegance of Vowel Alternation, but it is an area of concern for ESL speakers as they try to master English in a short timeframe. If there is a message here for ESL Teachers: it is that these words are not *irregular*, but indeed are repackaged in line with English nature. While it is true that all speakers of English have to learn the patterns, it is true also that once the patterns are known, the patterns themselves are regular; that is, they do not change randomly. Having said that, it must be admitted that vowel alternation instances can be challenging to ESL speakers to learn.

That woman can sing only softly, but the other women sang loudly.

The exemplar above shows an instance of past tense formation, created through Vowel Alternation, in a strong verb. It must be acknowledged, however, that there is a limited pool of strong verbs in which vowel alternation is able to take place. However, strong verb vowel alternation happens frequently, because strong verbs are prone to a high rate of usage. Additionally, vowel alternation verbs do represent an elegant and arguably subtle way to indicate tense.

Let's produce a greater range of produce.

Contrast the 'produce' pair above. There is a startling contrast there. At first sight, both exemplars feature verbal inflection, although ESL learners may not notice an inflection change because it is not reflected in the spellings. Depending on the inflection, the unchanged word is either intended to function grammatically as a nominal; else as a verbal. Fortunately, these kinds of instantiation do not occur in voluminous proportions. In closing this sub-section, it is reasonable to claim that the exemplars above represent the repackaging nature of English, even when it is minimal repackaging.

4.2. Syntactic (Sentence) Exemplars

When syntactical processes transform sentences, say from declarative into passive voice, this range of instances of repackaging has been described in a premise called Focus Promotion [18], where Focus indicates increased prominence, and Promotion indicates that right to left word movement occurs. Instances of repackaging in the vicinity of the Subject zone follow.

Have you ever considered helping a wheelchair-bound person?

Seldom have I ever even seen a wheelchair- bound person on the streets at night.

The exemplars above demonstrate that a Subject zone nominal may not always begin a sentence. It might be an accepted norm to think that finding the auxiliary verb *have* before the Subject zone would always indicate a question, but the second exemplar gives pause for further thought: is English tied into an implacable convention on sentences, or is it tied into a nature of flexibility expressed through coherent repackaging? The second exemplar above indicates flexibility as the answer.

So do I! Nor've they! As do the rich! So were we! So say all of us (In ritual usage)!

Referring momentarily to spoken English, the exemplars

above further demonstrate sentence repackaging through word movement.

The realization stunned me.

I was stunned by the realization.

A more dramatic repackaging occurs in the creation of a passive voice sentence. In the cases above, the Subject zone is not merely preceded by a single newly placed word; instead, the Subject zone is repackaged in its entirety with Object zone contents, which become the new Focus as well as the new Subject. There are of course two other points that are in need of mention. The converse movement of Subject zone contents to Object zone can be suppressed. Finally, and although the exemplar has not been chosen to demonstrate this point, repackaging can require an insertion of 'been' into the Verb zone in order to satisfy grammatical dictates. Should it be needed, a fuller description of the Focus Promotion premise on sentence construction can be found elsewhere [18]. Additionally, a study is available of the Verb zone, written in a spirit of trying to understand not only the real barriers experienced by ESL speakers, but also specifying further knowledge prerequisites for successful sentence construction by ESL students [23].

4.3. Morphophonemic (Word with Attached Letter) Exemplars

There is another instance of repackaging English, which is well known by native speakers, but appears to become an ordeal to ESL speakers, and this is contraction. Instances of contraction occur at the morphophonemic level when a standalone word such as modal 'would' is shrunk into '*d*, and this contracted modal is then appended to a nominal in the Subject zone, becoming the cluster 'we'*d*'. While this inter-zone repackaging seemingly stretches Greenberg's SVO premise [17], it can be claimed as congruent with a repackaging nature. Such contractions are a confusing ordeal to ESL learners because '*d* does not have a single parsing. In usage, the contraction instance could be parsed up as auxiliary 'did'; or, indeed as auxiliary 'had'; or, as modal 'would'. English repackaging similarly permits contraction with another letter, which is '*s* which has two parsing interpretations, these being 'i*s*' and 'ha*s*'. Of course, the ESL ordeal of decoding semaphores does not end there, because '*s* can also be used to repackage a nominal (such as, Chuck) into an adjective (Chuck'*s*); while a non-apostrophised *s* can indicate nominal plurality (female*s*); as well as indicating third person singular (she hope*s*). Exemplar instances of contraction repackaging now follow.

She'd have been late anyway.

In the above example, a contraction process has been invoked. Its function is to repackage a full word (here, the *would* morpheme) into a single letter (here, the *d* phoneme), where meaning remains the same, despite the contraction. After being prefixed (in writing) with an apostrophe, the contracted cluster is repackaged as part of a nominal in the Subject zone.

If she'd stayed on the expressway, it would have been OK.

Although a seemingly identical contraction process has been invoked, this is a different instance because, although the repackaging has produced the *d* phoneme, that phoneme now participates as the 'ha*d*' morpheme. While repackaging has usage benefits, it undoubtedly challenges ESL learning success.

Where'd she turn off, I wonder.

Repackaging can produce not only twin outputs, but triplets. This is shown in the above exemplar where repackaging has again produced the *d* phoneme, but where that phoneme now represents the 'di*d*' morpheme. A more extended treatment of contractions, and the problems of interpretation facing ESL under-construction speakers, can be consulted elsewhere [24].

4.4. Morphemic (Word) Exemplars

Continuing with maximizing flexibility by rejecting the constraints of convention, English undertakes further instances of repackaging, this time at the full word (morphemic) level. It happens when English pairs a verb (such as 'run') with a preposition (such as 'up'). Akin to other instances, this instance also has its own separate nomenclature, and is known as *phrasal verb*. Although instances are limited, the English nature of *repackaging* can feature a phrasal verb in which two prepositions are deployed. Understandably, shorter phrasal verbs are more manifest than longer versions. Even though there are many instances, multiple instantiations should not be read as constituting complexity. In fact, the existence of many instances portrays a basic simplicity that is driven by English's overarching yet singular, repackaging nature. Exemplar instances of repackaging of phrasal verbs now follow.

You may run up your debts to ridiculous levels, but I never run mine up that high.

By repackaging a verb with a preposition, a new phrasal verb construction (*run up*) is achieved, here meaning 'escalate'. As the above exemplar demonstrates, repackaging can take a second form, as in *run debts up*. Both instances are congruent with the Focus Promotion premise [18], in terms of simplicity of operation.

High debt is not something I could put up with.

Although less frequently encountered, the repackaging of a verb with *two* prepositions also delivers a new verb construction, here meaning 'tolerate'. Phrasal verbs allow English to increase lexicon membership and hence the communicative range of verbs. Phrasal verbs may be lamented by purist grammarians as something up with which they dislike to put (to echo Churchill's famous quip), but learned others may celebrate this particular *instantiation* as one among many.

In summary, and in spite of contesting Wrenn's suggested characteristics, thanks are overly due to him. He is to be congratulated for keeping alive a belief in the worthiness of English, which would have taken not an insignificant effort against a backdrop of high status classical languages. It is not too great an exaggeration to think that Wrenn's attempts at linking English in a positive manner to the classical languages might have helped to raise the status of English by association. This paper commends his efforts as valiant, and

acknowledges that his example inspired this paper to achieve a more complete, and more reliable, analysis and exposition of the central nature of English, which is subtle *repackaging* within and across boundaries. This paper hopes that the Academy is now more fully informed on, and able to benefit from, the sustained innovative revelations herein concerning the nature driving the English language.

5. Limitation

This paper did not treat semantics as an individual section, and while leaving open the opportunity for other analysts to do so, it maintains an element of expectation that repackaging of literal meanings does exist, and is substantiated in examples of repackaging into metaphorical extensions, and elsewhere.

6. Conclusion

The inspiration for this paper comes from a rare but laudable attempt which was made some years now past, by an expert in classical languages, hoping to discern the *nature* of English. Although that attempt could be seen as valiant, it did fail. Encouraged by that earlier attempt, but believing that English nature is probably hidden in plain sight, this paper utilised a careful but in-depth analysis to seek a greater understanding of the English nature. Therefore, the chosen methodology was to present an uncluttered set of exemplars which almost lets English speak for itself. A second but nevertheless important part of the methodology was to seek fundamental high-level associations, thereby eschewing any attitude that is driven to emphasize the separation of parts of speech, while not searching for the unity that can be found in similarities. The advantage of this paper's approach dwells in its ability to reveal similarities of operation that exist across all levels – these being syntactic (sentences), morphemic (words), phonemic (letters) and morphophonemic (word with attached letter) operations. Irrespective of the number of instances of similarity (and there are many), this paper has shown that all instances can be grouped together into a single constellation. That constellation is created by English employing a philosophy of across-the-board *repackaging*, which this paper claims portrays the essential nature of English. If there is an unexpected irony in the repackaging nature of English, it is this: English defies convention in order to maximize flexibility. Who would have expected English to share similarities with the Artful Dodger character in Dicken's *Oliver Twist* novel?

A major opportunity, arising from this paper's determination to locate and provide an innovative yet informative understanding of English's natural selection of *repackaging*, is that ESL teachers, and ESL curriculum designers, have finally been advised more fully on grammatical structures across the breadth of English. If native speakers, at a tender age, benefitted from detecting and deploying their now automatized knowledge of *repackaging*, why would under-construction English as a Second Language speakers not benefit from understanding English *repackaging*, as convention-departing as it is?

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