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## Correcting of a Mistaken Impression [as an important feature of language]

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### CORRECTING OF A MISTAKEN IMPRESSION

There is a feature of language which I will term *the correcting of a mistaken impression*,<sup>1</sup> which although possibly very widespread (both in any given language and in a wide variety of languages) is only imperfectly understood by linguists. Previous treatments on this subject have been hazy or at best very fragmentary, and so an overall examination of it is in order.

Since other linguists have touched upon CMI, the following capsulization of this feature is not entirely original, but it will hopefully be clearer and then better developed than the earlier treatments:

Two speakers are not only exchanging information when they speak. They are also aware that any statement they make may contradict an impression or opinion held by the other person. Information correcting a mistaken impression is often accompanied by a form (e.g. *actually, but*) which says in effect: 'I am aware of your mistaken impression and am correcting it'.

One of the clearest treatments of CMI appears in Yanada — Dunn (1968: 35), who describe one of the uses of the Japanese particle *wa*: "[...] you will find another use of *wa*. A typical occurrence is in instances like the following — a person asks you if your luggage is heavy: *Nimotu wa omoi desu ka*; you may answer 'No, it isn't — *Omoku wa arimasen*'. This use of *wa* is found when the idea of contrast is present. In *omoku wa arimasen* there is a feeling of 'contrary to what you suggest by asking if my luggage is heavy, it is in fact not heavy'."

Herndon (1970: 163) also seems to be on the right track when she writes of "the reaffirmation transformation", saying:

"All kernel sentences are affirmative. Laying extra stress at a given point in such a sentence reinforces this affirmative quality of the sentence. For example, the sentence 'You can do it' may be given an extra measure of insistence with the addition of extra stress on the word *can*, 'You *can* do it'."

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter abbreviated CMI. The present article discusses CMI synchronically and leaves the diachronic aspect for a later date.

I would only comment that *reaffirmation* is not the most accurate term to use here; we deal rather with CMI, i.e., 'You think you can't do it, but this impression is wrong; you can in fact do it'.

And Whitney (1968: 274) is likewise on the right track when he says of the Finnish particle *-pa/-pā*:

'*-pa, -pā* is attached to a word to lend it emphasis, especially where contradiction is needed:

*En minä sita sanonut. — Sanoitpa.* (= I did not say that. Oh yes, you did.)

However, an earlier statement of Whitney's (pp. 272–273) is also of interest here: "Suffixed particles [...] all add something to the meaning of the word to which they are attached, but not always in a way that can be readily classified grammatically [...]" The point of my article is that CMI is an integral part of language and that it is improper to regard it as outside the scope of grammar. CMI is outside only the scope of traditional grammar, but it is now well recognized that traditional grammar has its limitations, and one of them, in my opinion, is the overlooking of CMI.

#### ILLUSTRATIONS

A good example is *actually*, which might be used in the following context. Suppose a friend of mine is leaving prison after a 5 year sentence, and I ask him what his stay there had been like. Suppose too that he answers: *Actually, I had a good time.* We would see a clear expression of CMI here, since *actually*, in this sentence says: 'I am aware of your impression that I had a very trying time these past 5 years, but this impression is wrong; my stay was not at all unpleasant'.

Or suppose you throw a party, and a departing guest tells you: *Thanks so much. I actually had a good time.* The word *actually* turns the statement into a left-handed compliment, since *actually* says here: 'I had a good time, contrary to my expectations; your parties are usually so boring that the pleasant evening this time came as a surprise'.

Cf. also: *I can hardly believe it. He actually gave a short speech.* And: *This bulldog looks mean. Actually, he's very gentle.*

A second example is *just*, although only one of its meanings is CMI, e.g. *That just isn't possible* (i.e. you may think it's possible, but this is a mistaken impression on your part), *They just may be innocent* (i.e. the whole town is certain of their guilt, but this impression is mistaken; there is at least an outside chance that they are innocent).

A number of other examples in English may be presented with little or no commentary:

1. *nevertheless*, e.g. *Our team lost its first four games. Nevertheless we knew we could win the championship.*

2. *sure* (= of course)
  - e.g. a. 1. *Are you sure?*  
2. *Sure I'm sure.*
  - b. 1. *You can't go there.*  
2. *Sure I can.*
  - c. 1. *Did you go there?*  
2. *I sure did.*
3. *indeed*, e.g. *The Russians said they had released their prisoners, and the following day we learned they had indeed done so.*
4. *no sir/no siree*, e.g. *You expect me to walk alone at night through Central Park? No siree, not this boy.*
5. *damn well better*, e.g. *The ads say: "Do you have an acid stomach?" You damn well better have an acid stomach.* (spoken by a biology professor)
6. *did* (+ verb),
  - e.g. a. *I did swim 10 laps, Coach. I really did.*
  - b. *You're wrong. I did try to help.*
7. *I'm afraid...* (correcting a mistaken hope),
  - e.g. a. *I'm afraid Mr. Smith can't see you today.*
  - b. *I'm afraid you'll have to try something else.*
8. *do* (+ verb), e.g. *You're wrong. I do swim 10 laps a day.*
9. *do so/do too*, and *did so/did too*,
  - e.g. 1. *You don't swim 10 laps a day.*
  2. *I do so.*
10. *even* (= also + OMI),
  - e.g. *Everybody showed up at that party. Even the chancellor was there.*
11. *simply*,
  - e.g. a. *That simply isn't possible.*
  - b. *You will simply have to try harder.*
12. *however*, e.g. *It looks hopeless. I'll see what I can do, however.*
13. (Various others); fixed expressions for OMI:
  - Ah, but there's where you're wrong.*
  - Oh, no you don't.*
  - Over my dead body.*
  - Not on your life.*
  - Not for a million bucks.*
  - go on* (e.g. working) = continue + OMI
  - keep* (e.g. working) *away* = continue + OMI.

OMI is also very frequent in foreign languages. I taught German and Russian for several years and explained to my classes that German *doch* and Russian *ved'*, two very troublesome particles semantically, become clear as soon as they approached with OMI in mind. And every time we came across these particles in a reading assignment, we went looking for OMI for the given context, and we always found it. A few examples will suffice: German *doch*:

1. *Schweizer arbeitete 16 Stunden im Tag; doch er war glücklich* (= Schweizer worked 16 hours a day; still he was happy).
2. *Es war ein Hund, und doch kein Hund* (= It was a dog and yet not a dog).
3. *Du kannst nicht gehen.*  
*Dosh.* (= You can't go. — Yes, I can.)
4. *Klaus hat doch Urlaub bekommen* (= Klaus got a vacation after all; i.e. nobody thought he was going to get it, but after all this uncertainty, the vacation came through).

Russian *ved'*

1. *Ty menja ne uznal'sj? My ved' starye druz'ja.* (= You don't know me? We're old friends; i.e. your impression that you don't know me is wrong).
2. *Ne xotite li vy so mnoj poexat'?* *Mne ved' po doroge.* (= Don't you want to go with me (to the church); it's on my way; i.e. your impression that you'll inconvenience me is wrong).
3. *Poezđaj s barinom. Ved' barin ne volk. Bojat'sja nečego.* (= Go with the gentleman. The gentleman is not a wolf. There's nothing to fear; i.e. your impression that the gentleman is somehow to be feared is wrong).

Chinese *le*

The Chinese particle *le* has several different usages, but one of them seems to be CMI. Here is a relevant passage from Chan (1959: 34):

"As a modal particle *le* [...] may be used in connection with a changed situation to indicate determination (*wǒ pū ch'ù le* = 'I am not going!' (Before the situation had changed I thought I could go), confirmation (*tsótien mei lai te jen shih ni le* = 'the person who didn't come yesterday is you' (all along I thought it was you, but now I am positive it is you), command or request (*nǐ men pūyào shuō le* = 'Don't talk') [...]"

The first example presented just above by Chan shows a clear example of CMI: the example in effect says: 'I had the impression I could go, but this impression turned out to be wrong (due to a changed situation)'. CMI is also fairly clear in the third example, which says in effect: 'You have the impression that there is nothing wrong with continuing your conversation, but this impression is wrong; stop right now'. As for the second example, two thoughts must be distinguished:

- (1) *The person who didn't come was you.*
- (2) *There's some doubt concerning the above thought.*

The particle *le* here is aimed at correcting the impression of doubt in #2 (i.e. the doubt was unjustified). Of course the other impression (the main one) turns out to be correct. For parallel examples in more familiar languages, cf. French *bien* in *C'est bien lui* (= It's him all right; e.g. in De Maupassant's *Mon Oncle Jules*) and German *doch* in *Was er sagte stimmt doch* (= what he said is true).

Here are a few more examples on Chinese *le* that I have taken from Chan 1959.

(1) (p. 48, sentence #13) says: 'I don't have any Chinese money, but I have American money; would you want some?' To which his friend replies: *Pū yaò le, Meikuo-ch'ien wǒ yék yǔ.* (= No I don't. I have American money too.) The first friend has the mistaken impression that his friend might need American money, and the second friend corrects this impression, using *le*.

(2) (p. 67, #16): "[...] *Pai hsiensheng, shíhhou pū tsaǒ le, wǒ yaò hui-chiā ch'ù le. Mingj'ien chièn*" (= Mr. Pai. It's getting late, and I want to go home. I'll see you tomorrow.) This sentence says in effect: Mr. Pai, you have the impression that I would be happy to chat longer with you, but this impression is wrong, because I have to get home now.

#### TYPES OF CMI

Even a casual look at the CMI words indicates that all these words do not express exactly the same thing. There are many different types of CMI, and presented below is an initial attempt to categorize them.

First, one must distinguish between direct and indirect CMI. The examples presented thus far have all been direct CMI, e.g. *He got his vacation after all*. In indirect CMI the CMI word goes with one statement but refers to another; this other statement is a reminder, e.g.:

1. Avvakum to the czar: *Ty ved' rusak a ne grek.* (= You're a Russian and not a Greek.) Avvakum is saying here that the czar should stop imitating Greek customs; there is of course no question about the czar not being aware that he was Russian. The czar's mistaken impression was that imitating Greek customs was the correct thing for him to do).

2. *you know*, e.g. (from 1970) *What do you mean Nixon can't visit Albania? He can go anywhere he wants. He's the president, you know.* (i.e. 'Your impression that he can't visit Albania is incorrect'; there's no question about his being president, though.)

3. German *ja*, e.g. (from 1969) *Nixon kann die Truppen sofort abziehen. Er ist ja der President* (= Nixon can withdraw the troops at once. He's the president, you know.)

Among the cases of direct CMI, at least several subcategories can be spotted:

1. CMI word as a gentle slap on the wrist: there shouldn't even be any doubt (i.e. mistaken impression) on the point in question,

e.g. 1. *Will you help me?*

2. *Of course.*

2. Implication that new information is being related is incorrect, e.g. *Washington, of course, was our first president.*

By presenting factual information to you I am implying that you do not already know it. If this information is well known to you, I will add *of course*, or *as you know* in order not to offend you. Expressions like *of course* say in effect: 'Here is some material you already know'.

3. Sudden realization or acquiring of knowledge,
  - e.g. 1. *My goodness, that's really something.*
  2. *Hey great. Absolutely great.*
  3. *Fantastic. That's the best news I've heard in years.*
4. In a question a CMI word asks for clarification of scepticism,
  - e.g. a. *Did she really say that?*
  - b. *Did Professor Jones actually throw chalk at his students?*

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

First, it is well recognized that languages have a variety of means for expressing emphasis. I would only add here that emphasis fits into the overall picture of CMI; every instance of emphasis involves the correcting of some mistaken impression.

Secondly, one should distinguish at least three components in communication: (1) exchange of factual information (e.g. *Jack hit Bill*) and (2) CMI (e.g. contrary to expectation, e.g. *actually*, e.g. *Jack actually hit his father*), (3) editorial comment (e.g. *Jack killed Bill* vs *Jack murdered Bill*). This linguistic feature, although not yet incorporated into a theory of language, is well recognized by philosophers. Bentham, for example, has written (reprinted in Mandelbaum et al. 1957: 378):

"What then? (it will be said) are not lust, cruelty, avarice, bad motives? [...] the fact is, that these are names which, if properly applied, are never applied but in the cases where the motives they signify happen to be bad. The names of these motives, considered apart from their effects, are sexual desire, displeasure, and pecuniary interest. To sexual desire, when the effects of it are looked upon as bad, is given the name of lust. Now lust is always a bad motive. Why? Because if the case be such, that the effects of the motive are not bad, it does not go, or at least ought not to go, by the name of lust [...]"

And thirdly, even though traditional grammar has been sharply attacked, the modern theories of grammar all seem to be merely traditional grammar in disguise. This grammar acts as a sort of mental strait jacket on linguists, and perhaps one of the prime tasks of linguistic theoreticians is to find a way to break out of it. Towards this end I would suggest two approaches: (1) proceeding inductively (rather than emerging with a full-blown theory) and (2) seizing upon any and all exceptions to a traditional interpretation and seeing where an analysis of these exceptions leads

(the usual current *de facto* method of dealing with refractory exceptions is to set them aside). The present article represents a very initial step towards carrying out the two above suggestions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Speech act analysis and relational grammar have also made a start in this direction; but one will have to wait to judge the vigor with which the proponents of these schools pursue the exceptions.