

On the principles of grammar writing

Fred Karlsson

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Karlsson (2005, henceforth K-05) criticized several claims in Itkonen (2003, henceforth I-03). Itkonen's reply (2005, henceforth I-05) to K-05 prompts me to the following concluding comments.

I-03 claimed that grammars composed in all cultures and all historical periods are remarkably uniform. K-05 demonstrated the untenability of this 'uniformity hypothesis' by introducing the (rather self-evident) tripartition between large reference grammars, introductory school grammars, and field grammars, all hugely different in scope and methodology. I-05 is silent in face of this criticism, thus obviously giving up his 'uniformity hypothesis'. Itkonen's silence is especially remarkable as concerns the methodological practices of large modern reference grammars for which his claims of the irrelevance of corpus observation are simply false.

I-05 notes that his wholesale rejection of observation in grammar writing ("irrelevance of spatiotemporal occurrences") on page 23 in I-03 is "qualified on p. 34". This is equal to admitting being inconsistent which was precisely what K-05 claimed I-03 had been. If observation of spatiotemporal occurrences is not fully irrelevant, it is relevant.

I-03 (34) insisted that observation is needed in grammar writing only in connection with variation, in particular with regard to frequencies of occurrence, social and geographical variation, and language change. But K-05 provided ample evidence drawn from several large reference grammars showing that observation is normally invoked throughout the description, along with use of intuition in clear cases. No grammar writer has personal intuitive mastery of the full range of phenomena to be accounted for in a large reference grammar.

In I-03, Itkonen promised to explicate what grammarians "do in fact", but said next to nothing about how advanced grammars are composed. Of the three types of grammars mentioned above, only school grammar books such as Miettinen (1955) are written without essential use of observation, i.e. corpus work. But now I am happy to see that Itkonen explicitly admits (I-05: 365), apparently for the first time in his collected works, that corpus observation is indeed indispensable throughout advanced grammar writing, e.g. in the description of complex constructions.

I-03 claims that Hakulinen & Karlsson (1979) (the title of which is *Nykysuomen lauseoppia*, not "Suomen kielen lauseoppia" as in Itkonen's list of references) could have been written without corpus observation. Certainly this book contains hundreds of invented examples, but likewise it contains hundreds of genuine examples. Itkonen's opinion that it could have been written without corpus observation is mere speculation.

Itkonen claims that K-05 takes linguistics to be "just one natural science among others" (I-05: 366). Certainly no such claim was made in K-05. Instead, the claim was that normative considerations, especially the idea of prototypes, are relevant in some of the natural sciences, e.g. ornithology, in much the same way as in grammar writing, thus contesting Itkonen's claim that "rule-sentences" like (1) are quite different from "empirical hypotheses" (Itkonen's terms) like (2):

- (1) In English, the definite article precedes the noun.
- (2) All ravens are black.

My point was that (2) should rather be expressed and interpreted as (3) if it is to be seriously taken as an empirical hypothesis of professional ornithology:

- (3) All prototypical ravens are black.

This is so because there is a normative element in the ornithologist's conception of what he/she studies: normal, prototypical, i.e. 'correct' ravens, not abnormal or accidentally damaged, 'incorrect' ones, just like the grammar writer is primarily interested in prototypical (= grammatically correct) sentences. Itkonen blames me for a "monumental confusion" and then goes on:

- (4) "Of course the empirical hypothesis [i.e. (2) / FK] is falsified by albino (= non-black) ravens. Just **look at** the empirical hypothesis as it is formulated before your very eyes. It is **not** about **prototypical** ravens, it is about **all** ravens. It claims that **all** ravens, without exception, are black. Therefore if, and when, we find an entity which is a raven and yet is not black (for instance, an albino raven), then the hypothesis is falsified. If the hypothesis had been formulated **differently**, i.e. as 'All prototypical ravens are black', and if we have reason to consider albino ravens as non-prototypical, then – and only then – the hypothesis would not be falsified by albino ravens. – If you do not understand this argument on the first reading, I advise you to read again." (I-05: 371-372, emphases original)

Of course Itkonen is right in terms of logical form alone. But there is a fundamental problem in (2) and (4) concerning concept formation, i.e. the precise definition of the word *raven*, and its relation to prototypicality. What is the meaning of *raven*? From the three English dictionaries I happen to have on my shelf I cite (s.v. *raven*):

- (5) "A **raven** is a large bird with shiny black feathers and a deep harsh call." (*Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*)
- (6) "a large passerine bird, *Corvus corax*, having a large straight bill, long wedge-shaped tail, and black plumage" (*Collins English Dictionary*)
- (7) "any of several large, corvine birds having lustrous, black plumage and a loud harsh call, especially *Corvus corax*" (*Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*)

Thus, blackness is part of the lexical meaning of *raven*, at least as expounded in ordinary dictionaries. Blackness also passes all standard semantic tests for qualifying as a canonical semantic feature of *raven* (Cruse 1986: 19). Because blackness is a definitional feature of *raven*, the idea of a 'non-black raven' is strictly speaking anomalous and this, of course, is precisely what real-world albino ravens are. All **normal ravens** are black and this certainly makes blackness a highly salient and semantically relevant feature of ravens. Furthermore, given the frequent, often blackness-related occurrence of ravens e.g. in European myths and legends, it seems impossible to deny the semantic importance of raven blackness.

Thus, under a strict interpretation of the meaning of *raven*, including blackness, albino ravens are not ravens. An instance of an albino raven does not falsify (2) because what (2) really means is paraphrased in (3). Note that (8) is contradictory whereas (9) is normal:

- (8) *All ravens are black but there are a few white ones as well.
 (9) All prototypical ravens are black but there are a few white ones as well.

Imperfect, ill-formed, not fully functional, accidentally damaged etc. individuals have no relevance for determining the nature of the prototype. Similarly, scientific descriptions of natural kinds of course treat prototypes and make no explicit exceptions for abnormalities. It would be strange to describe the plumage of ravens by stating that, say, 99.9999 % are black and .0001 % (the imperfect albinos) white. Rather, individuals with an albinic deficiency in pigmentation, across plant and animal species, are exempted by general convention when the prototype is at stake.

In consequence of this discussion, Itkonen's 'empirical hypothesis' (2) is not really an empirical hypothesis at all but rather a tautology. The asserted blackness is inherent already in the definiendum.

K-05 called for a precise statement of the vocabulary and syntax of the presumed atheoretical rule-sentences, as compared to the vocabulary and syntax of grammar rules proper. I-05 offers no detailed answer, thus corroborating the impression that these vocabularies and syntaxes would be overlapping. Itkonen (1983: 263) admitted that formulations of his atheoretical rule-sentences (then called norm-sentences) presuppose knowledge and use of "the rudiments of the linguistic terminology". It certainly is inconsistent to allow statements claimed to be atheoretical to contain theoretical terms.

As for the falsifiability of the presumed atheoretical rule-sentences, I finally note that K-05's examples (10, 11) do indeed falsify both rule-sentence (1) and Itkonen's attempt to make (1) atheoretical by stepping down to the level of individual words (12):

- (10) third *man*, *the*
 (11) Look at that *man*, *the* fat one over there.
 (12) *The man* is right, *man the* is wrong.

References

- Cruse, D. A. (1986) *Lexical semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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