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# NULL CONSTITUENTS AND THE ORDER OF DERIVED STRUCTURES

By

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## Abstract

*This paper, 'Null Constituents and the Order of Derived Structures' is a generativist approach to language study. The paper proves that null constituent occurs when an element is deleted in a construction, and that not all deleted elements are recoverable. The method of data collection for this paper involved primary source provided by the conscious observation of the intuition of proficient users of English, both natives and non-natives, and secondary source involving the consultation of related articles/books on null constituents.*

*Chomsky (1965:4-6) argues that many properties of generative grammar arise from an "innate" universal grammar which is common to all languages. Proponents of generative grammar such as Chomsky and Radford argue that most grammar is not the result of communicative function and is not simply learnt from the environment. This paper examines null constituents as an aspect of generative grammar and Crystal (1991:238) defines null constituent as ... an application in GENERATIVE GRAMMAR of the mathematical use of this term, with the general meaning of EMPTY or ZERO. as in 'null subject' (a phonologically empty constituent, PRO) or 'null element'. The paper concludes that learners of English can have a better and even deeper understanding of the language through the generativist perspective. Finally the paper recommends among others that learners of English, particularly at the post primary level should be exposed to the deep structure of the English language to enable them have a better understanding of the language at that level before they get to the higher level of learning.*

Key words: Generative grammar, Null constituents, Clauses, Sentences, Subject.

## Introduction

Null constituent is an aspect of transformational generative grammar which examines the null realization of constituents in language. It studies the deep structure of sentences and accounts for the transformations that have taken place at that level resulting to what we see as the output in surface structure and use in the functional context.

## Null Constituents

Crystal (1991:238) defines null constituents as "... an application in GENERATIVE GRAMMAR of the mathematical use of this term, with the general meaning of EMPTY or ZERO, as in 'null subject' (a phonologically empty constituent, PRO) or 'null element.'"

Examples: (I) *John **plays** ludo, Peter [ ] flute, and Mark [ ] chess.*

(II) *The man **was** drunk and the girl, [ ] sick with fatigue.*

The bold-faced elements in these examples are realized as null constituents in the positions marked by the square brackets in sentences (I) and (II) above.

## Null Subjects

The English Language has three types of null subjects, namely: imperative null subject, non-finite null subject, and truncated null subject.

### i. Imperative null subject

These are usually found in imperatives such as:

*Shut up! Don't say anything!* (Imperatives are sentences used to issue orders/commands; they are the kind of sentences that are usually introduced by the word *please*, as in *please don't say anything!*)

### ii. Non-finite null subject

This is found in a range of non-finite clauses in English (i.e. clauses containing a verb which is not marked for tense and agreement), including main clauses such as those bracketed in *I want [to go home]* and *I love [drinking wine]*: the kind of null subject found in non-finite clauses in English is usually



designated as PRO and called 'big PRO'.

### iii. Truncated null subject

English Language has a process of truncation which allows one or more words at the beginning of a sentence to be truncated (i.e. omitted) in certain types of style (e.g. diary styles of written English and informal styles of spoken English). It is common in colloquial English for a question such as *Are you doing anything tonight?* to be truncated to *doing anything tonight?*

But the process of truncation has a constraint. That is, it can only affect words at the beginning of a sentence, not for example, words in the middle of a sentence: thus, although we can truncate *are* and *you* in *Are you doing anything tonight?*, we cannot truncate them in *what are you doing tonight?* (as we find in the ungrammaticality of *\*What doing tonight?*) since here *are* and *you* are preceded by *what* and hence occur in the middle of the sentence. (Radford, 2009:82)

### Imperative Null Subjects

An imperative sentence in English can have an overt subject which is either a second person expression like *you* or a third person expression like *anyone*. Radford (2009:82) accounts for this using the examples:

1. Don't lose your nerve!
2. Don't anyone lose their nerve!

Radford (2009:82) however explains that English also allows an imperative null subject in imperative sentences like (3a) below, and these are intrinsically second person – as the contrast with (3b) illustrates:

- 3a. Don't lose your nerve!
- \*b. Don't lose their nerve!

What these indicate is that imperative null subjects seem to be a silent counterpart of *you*. To describe this, one could say that the pronoun *You<sub>i</sub>* can have a *null spell out* (and so, have its phonetic features not spelled out i.e. deleted/omitted when it is the subject of an imperative sentence.

### Non-finite Null Subject

This is found in non-finite clauses which do not have overt subject. In this regard, let us compare the structure of the embedded infinite clauses in the

(a) and (b) examples below:

4a. We would like [*you* to stay]

b. We would like [to stay]

5a. We don't want [*anyone* to upset them]

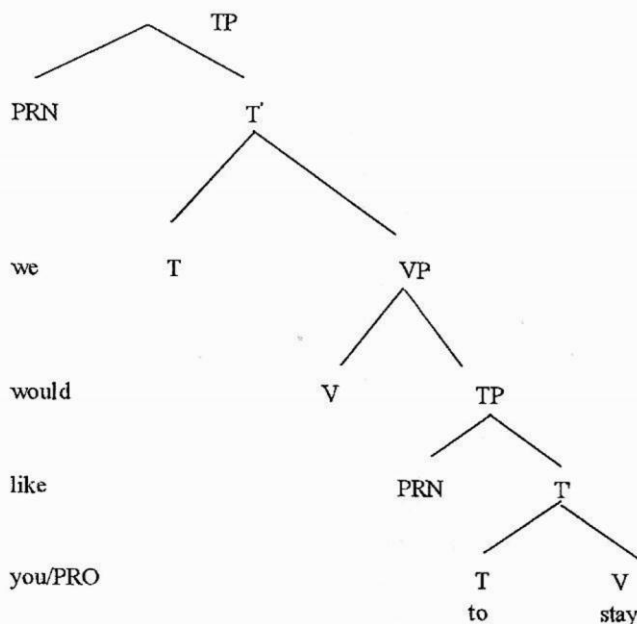
b. We don't want [to upset them]

For each of the bracketed infinite complemented clauses in the examples (a) in (4) and (5), there is an overt subject. By contrast however, it is arguable that apparently subjectless infinite clauses contain a null subject. The (b) examples in (4) and (5) have null pronouns. With this analysis, examples (4a) and (5b) have paralleled structure except that the bracketed TP has an overt pronoun *you* as its subject in (4a), but a null PRO as its subject in (4b).

PRO is a symbol associated with a base generated subject of certain infinitives. It refers to an element which substitutes for a lexical item elsewhere in a sentence. Thus, PRO is said to have an empty phonetic content.

(4) (a) and (b) have the structure:

6.



(Radford, 2009:83)

The motivation for this assumption that apparently subjectless infinite complements such as those bracketed in (4b) and (5b) alone have a null PRO subject comes from the intuition that the verb *stay* in (4b) above has an understood subject and positing a PRO subject; the *stay* clause captures this intuition. The null PRO subject of a controlled infinitive becomes overt if the infinitive clause is substituted by a finite clause, as in the examples below:

7a. John promised [PRO to come to the programme]

7b. John promised [*he* would come to the programme]

From these, it is plausible to assume that the overt subject in the bracketed clause makes it clear to suppose also that it is synonymous to the bracketed clause in the (a) example with null subject.

### Null Auxiliaries

The analysis of null auxiliaries is with finite clauses which contain no overt auxiliary. In this respect, let us consider the example in Radford (2009:86) below:

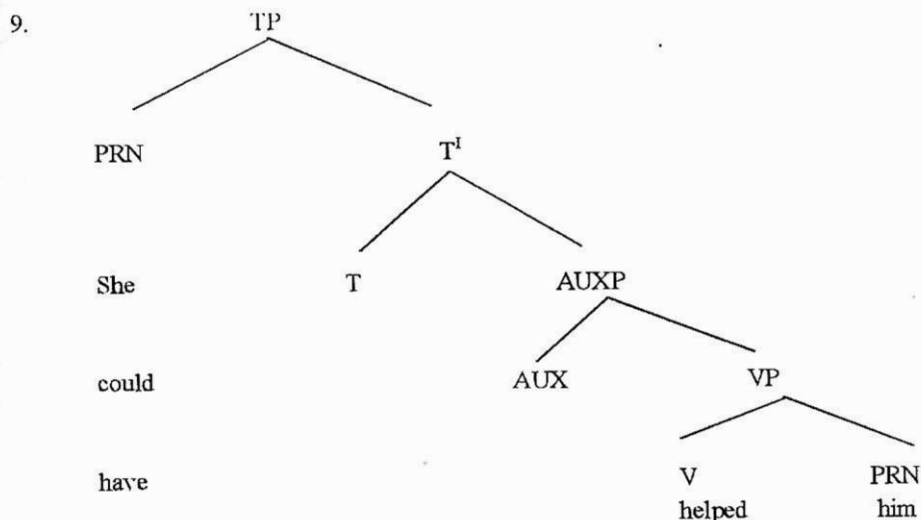
8. He could have helped her, or [*she* have helped him].

The two clauses here, the *he* and the bracketed *she* clause, appear to be finite, since both have nominative subjects (*he/she*). If all finite clauses contain TP projections that are headed by finite T constituents, it then follows that both clauses in (8) must be TPs containing a finite T.

The sentence (8) above shows that the '*he*' clause contains a finite auxiliary *could* whereas the *she* clause does not contain any finite auxiliary constituent since *have* is an infinite form (which requires a third person such as '*she*' to have a corresponding finite auxiliary *has*).

To account for a finite clause which has a projection of a finite T constituent where the clauses such as that in (8) contain no finite auxiliary, it is assumed that the sentence *she have helped him* in (8) is an elliptical (abbreviated) variant of *she could have helped him*, and that the T constituent *could* in the second clause undergoes 'gapping' – a form of ellipsis (Gapping is a grammatical operation which allows the head of a phrase to be given null spell out and so be 'silent' – when the same item occurs elsewhere within the sentence, and is so called because it leaves an apparent 'gap' on the phrase where the head would otherwise have been) (Radford, 2009: 87).

Considering the second clause, we would have the structure (9) below (where *could* marks an ellipsed counterpart of *could*, and so, suppose that a non-finite auxiliary like *have* occupies the head Aux/Auxiliary position of the AUXP/Auxiliary Phrase: Aux P):



(Radford 2009:87)

What this implies is that the bracketed clause in (8) is an elliptical form of *she could have help him*: as accounted for in the tree analysis of (9) above where T contains a null counterpart of *could*. Furthermore, the subject of the clause is in the nominative case form *she* which explains the fact that the T position in (9) is filled by a 'silent' counterpart of the finite auxiliary *could* which requires a nominative subject just like other finite auxiliaries. Another justification here is that since the perfect auxiliary *have* is in the infinitive form and because *could* (being a null copy of *could*), and so (like *could*), selects a complement headed by an item (like *have*) in the infinitive form.

### Null T in Finite Clauses

In considering null T (tense) in finite clauses, Radford (2009:89) postulates that 'all finite clauses are TPs headed by an (overt or null) constituent'. This assumption has implications for finite clauses such as the following which



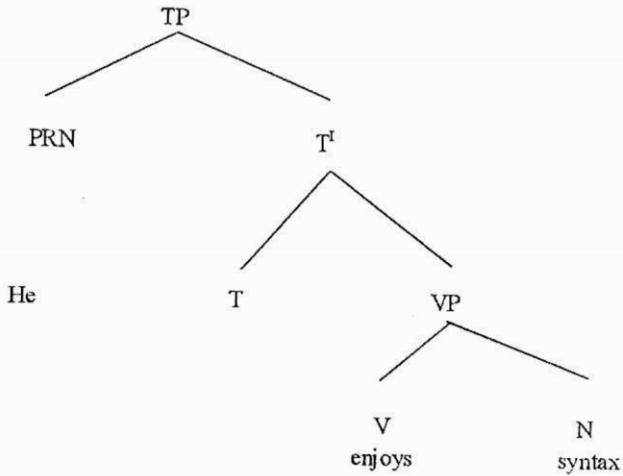
contain a finite verb, but no auxiliary:

10a. He enjoys syntax.

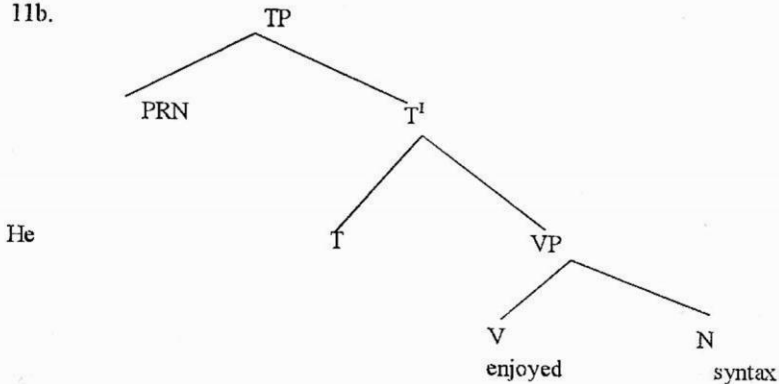
b. He enjoyed syntax.

What this implies is that auxiliariless clauses such as those in (10a, b) above should be analyzed as TP constituents which have the respective structures such as in (11a, b):

11a.



11b.



(Radford, 2009:89)

To assume that structures such as (11) above have *null T*, that is, the relevant clauses are TPs which are headed by a T constituent which contains *absolutely nothing*, makes the entire assumption odd. This is because a category label like T is an abbreviation for a set of features (i.e. grammatical properties) carried by a lexical item. For instance, to say that the structures in (11) are TPs, the head T position of TP has to be occupied by some kind of lexical item. In this case, we could postulate that the head T of TP contains some item which contributes in some way to the semantic interpretation of the sentence.

### Null T in Infinitive Clauses

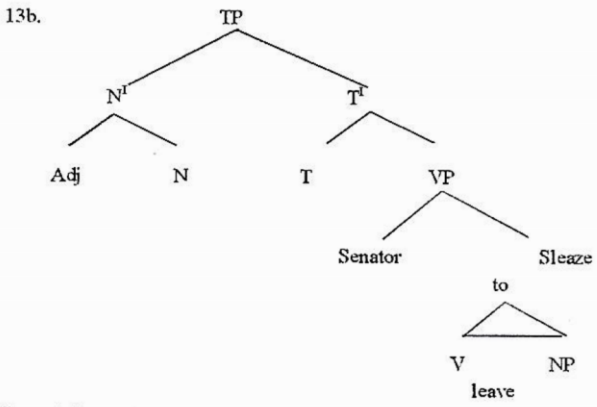
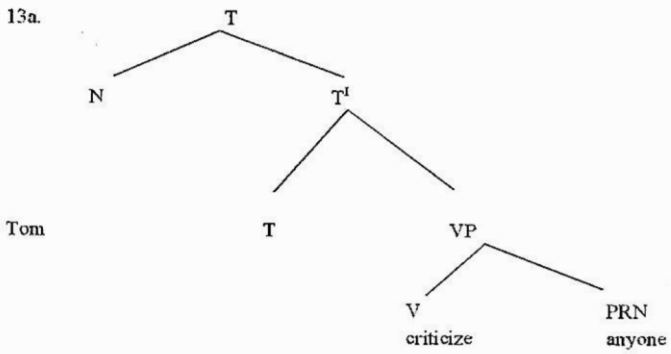
Auxiliaries finite clauses are TP constituents headed by an abstract T containing a tense affix and so, given that clauses containing a finite auxiliary are also TPs, it is possible to assume therefore that all finite clauses are TPs. Clauses which contain infinitive *to* are TPs with *to* serving as a non-finite tense participle. For this reason, we can say that all finite and infinitival clauses are TPs. This generalization thus has implications for how clauses such as the *bare* (i.e. *to*-less) infinitive complement clauses are analyzed. Let us consider constructions in Radford (2009:94):

12a I have never known [Tom *criticise* anyone]

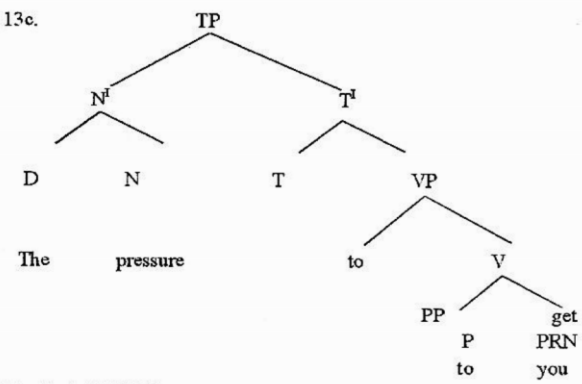
b. A reporter saw [Senator Sleaze *leave* Benny's Bunny-Bar]

c. You mustn't let [the pressure *get* to you]

If (according to earlier assumption) all finite and infinitival clauses are indeed TPs, bare infinitive clauses like those bracketed in (12) will be TPs headed by a null T constituent. The italicized verb in (12) (a-c) looks like the infinitival *to* which requires that the verbs in the bracketed complement clauses to be in the infinitive form and so, it becomes plausible to say that they have a null counterpart of infinitival *to* represented as *to*. These are represented structurally as:



Benny's Bunny-Bar



(Radford, 2009:95)

What this implies as Radford puts it, is that verbs like *know*, *see* and *let* (as used in (13) above) take an infinitival TP complement headed by an infinitive participle with a null spellout, while verbs like *expect*, *judge*, *report*, *believe*, etc take TP complement headed by an infinitive participle which is overtly spelled out as *to* in sentences such as those in (14) as in Radford (2009:95):

- 14a. I expect [him *to* win]
- b. I judged [him *to* be lying]
- c. They reported [him *to* be missing]
- d. I believe [him *to* be innocent]

It then means that all infinite T clauses are TPs headed by an infinitival T which is overtly spelled out as *to* in infinitive clauses like those bracketed in (14), but which has a null spell out in infinitive clauses like those bracketed in (15). In any case, some bare infinitive clauses have *to* – infinitive counterparts:

- 15a. I've never known [Tom (to) criticize anyone]
- b. Tom has never been known [*to* criticize anyone]
- 16a. A reporter saw (Senator Sleaze leave Benny's Bunny Bar)
- b. Senator Sleaze was seen [*to* leave Benny's Bunny Bar].

It is important that the infinitive participle which heads the bracketed infinitival TP in sentences such as (15, 16) is overtly spelled out as *to* when the relevant TP is used as the complement of a passive participle like *known* in (15b) or *seen* in (16b), but can have a null spell out when the relevant TP is the complement of an active transitive verb like the perfect participle *known* in (15a) or the past tense from *saw* in (16a).

### Null C in Finite Clauses

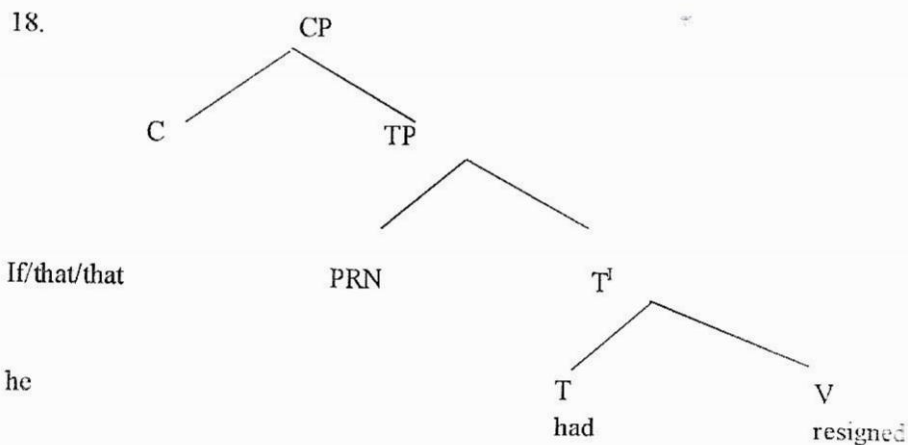
Clauses in English can be introduced by complementisers such as *if*/*that*/*for*, and complementiser clauses can further be considered to be CPs headed by a null complementizer. Let us consider the examples in Radford (97):

- 17a. We didn't know [*if* he had resigned]
- b. We didn't know [*that* he had resigned]
- c. We didn't know [*he* had resigned]

In 17(a) the clause is a CP headed by the complementiser *if* whereas (17) (b) is a CP headed the complementiser *that* and (17) (c) is a CP headed by a null variant of the complementiser *that* – represented as that the bracketed



complement clauses in (17a-c) represented thus (Radford, 2009: 97):



Let us further consider these examples:

19. (a) We didn't know [he had resigned]

(b) We didn't know [that he had resigned]

What such an analysis implies is that the complementiser *that* can optionally be given null phonetic spell out by having its phonetic features deleted in the PF (phonetic form) component under certain circumstances.

### Null C in Infinitive Clauses

It has thus far been established that all finite clauses (whether main clauses or complement clauses) are of CPs headed by an (overt or null) complementiser. But what about non-finite clauses? Let us consider the examples (20) in Radford (2009: 102)

20(a) She wanted [him to apologize]

b) She wanted [CP] for [C [TP to] apologize]]

At first sight (20a) might seem as if the bracketed complement clause in a sentence like (20a) can't be a CP, since it isn't introduced by the infinitival complementiser *for*. However, the type of infinitive complement bracketed in (20a) can be co-ordinated with a CP introduced by *for* in sentences such as the example (20b).

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

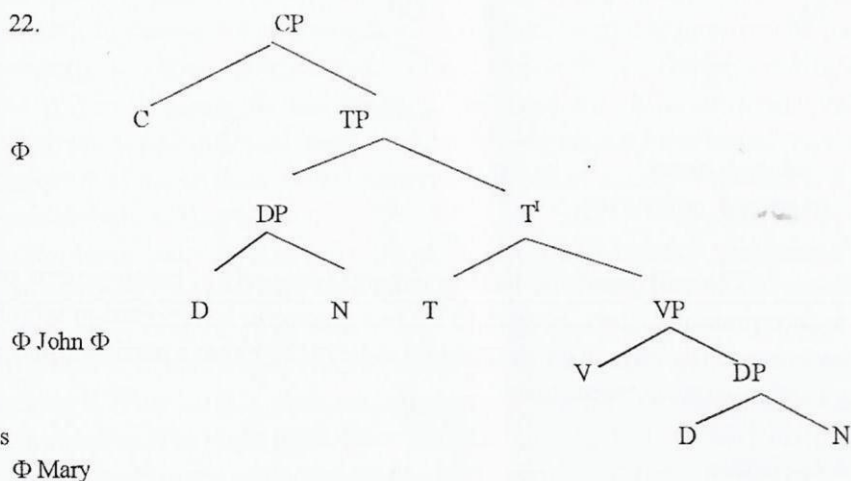
In (20a), we can say that the infinitive subject *him* is assigned accusative case by the complementizer *for* in structures such as (20b). In (20b), the complementizer *for* isn't overtly spelled out because it is supposed that it is given a null spell out and so, has its phonetic features deleted.

### Null Determiners and Quantifiers

Nominals (noun expressions) and bare nominals (noun expressions which contain no overt determiner or quantifier) are generally headed by a null determiner or null quantifier. In this respect, Radford (108) considers sentences such as:

21. *John* admires *Mary*

The possibility raised by this is that bare nouns like the italicized in (21) above are DPs headed by a null definite determiner, so that the overall sentence in (21) has the structure (22) below:



(Radford, 2009:109)

Radford explains that the assumption that all definite noun expressions are DPs (including those not containing an overt determiner) is referred to as the *DP hypothesis*. A DP analysis of bare definite noun expressions is plausible from a semantic perspective in that a name like *John* is a referring expression which

denotes a specific/definite individual in precisely the same way as a DP such as *this/that/the boy* does.

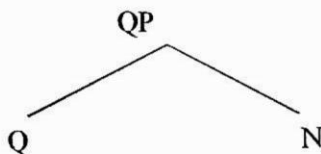
Apart from having a null definite determiner, English can also be argued to have a null (indefinite) quantifier. Again in this regard, Radford (2009:110) considers the following sentences:

23a. *Eggs* and *many dairy products* cause cholesterol.

b. I'd like *toast* and *some coffee* please.

The fact that the bare plural noun *eggs* is co-ordinated with QP/quantifier phrase *many dairy products* in (23a) suggests that *eggs* is a QP headed by a null quantifier. Similarly, the fact that the bare singular noun *toast* is co-ordinated with the QP *some coffee* in (23b) suggests that *toast* is also a QP headed by a null quantifier, so that the italicized nouns in (23) have the structure (24) below:

24.



$\Phi$  *eggs/toast*

(Radford, 2009:110)

The null quantifier has the semantic property of being generic or partive in interpretation: thus, *eggs* in (23a) has a generic interpretation which can be paraphrased as 'eggs in general', while *toast* in (23 b) has a partitive interpretation paraphraseable as 'some toast.'

## Conclusion

A generative grammar is essentially one that projects one or more given sets of sentences that make up the language one is describing; a process characterizing human language's creativity. A transformational generative grammar attempts to describe a native speaker's linguistic competence by framing linguistic descriptions of rules for generating an infinite number of grammatical sentences. A generative grammar, as understood by Chomsky, must also be explicit; that is, it must precisely specify the rules of the grammar and

their operating conditions.

Simply put, a generative grammar is a theory of availability and competence: a model of the psychological system of unconscious knowledge that underlies a speaker's ability to produce and interpret utterances in a language. A good way of trying to understand Chomsky's point is to think of a grammar as essentially a definition of competence: a set of criteria that linguistic structures must meet to be judged acceptable.

The study of English language does not just entail having a good knowledge of generative grammar and nothing else – English learning does not by any means begin and end with structure. But knowledge of the generative grammar is essential for the learner of the language. Thus the transformational approach to the learning of English is not an end in itself: it is only a foundation for the teaching and learning of certain other aspects and use of English.

Boadi et al (2004:5) stress that in addition to structure, a student learning English has to learn lots of unfamiliar words. The learner has to learn special idiomatic uses of words and how to listen and read with understanding. He has to also learn how to choose his own words, so that, when he speaks or writes he can convey exactly the meaning he wants to convey and no other. The learner has to learn the different forms of the language suitable for different situations, different purposes and different 'audiences.' Most importantly, the learner has to learn a great deal about the cultural patterns and social concepts of which the language is an outward expression.

The main issue as noted by Boadi et al (2004:6) is that the learner's command of language must remain at best unsure, no matter how many words, idioms or figures of speech he may learn. The skill of being able to use the different patterns of sentences, clauses, and other structures is indeed only one among many that the learner must acquire, but it is essential that most attention be concentrated on it to begin with. Learners gradually, in the course of learning, less and less attention are probably devoted to the study of structures, and more and more attention involving the more complex language. Yet without a firm foundation in structure provided by generative grammar, the growth of the more complex skills will always be slower and less than it need be.

Aarts (2001:3) explains that language can be analysed and processed by the interlocutors in a conversation. This indicates that for one to be effective in a



language, it is important to make conscious effort to understand the structure of the language. It involves how words are arranged in order to express correct idea. This has to do with syntax on one hand and semantics on the other hand. Syntax deals with how words are organised in a sentence while semantics deals with meaning. He explains further that a structure of a language is not a hotchpotch of a randomly distributed elements but a string of words arranged in accordance with a set of rules. This means that language is not arbitrarily formed. It requires a set of rules to enable the speaker make correct and appropriate utterances. A good understanding of the structure of a language will thus enhance the communicative efficacy of the speaker.

### **Recommendations**

The knowledge of the structure of language will enable the user to easily determine what will be termed grammatically acceptable within the communicative context since the set of rules of grammar will correctly predict which combinations of words will form grammatical sentences and also account for reasons why certain expressions are considered as either accepted or not in grammar. The following are therefore some recommendations towards enhancing and projecting the place of generative grammar in the study of English:

1. Learners of English, particularly at the post primary level should be exposed to the deep structure of the English language to enable them have a better understanding of the language at that level before they get to the higher level of learning.
2. Learners of English should have the opportunity of having a better and deeper understanding of the English language through learning the language from the generative perspective to language study and so they should be encouraged to learn language through this medium without hostility to generative grammar.
3. More attention should be given to the teaching of generative grammar and its relevance in advancing the functional approach to the study of language especially in Departments of English in Nigerian universities.
4. Modern textbooks and necessary materials for the teaching of

English structure should be procured, and teachers of English should be encouraged through training and retraining of teachers through advanced studies, workshops, seminars, etc. in the area of generative grammar.

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