

BLOCK THAT NONSENTENCE!
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As Chomsky has shown (1955:22), the set of sentences $S_1 \dots S_n$ of a language L are generated by the speaker's syntactic component of the grammar of L . After the selection of lexical items to fit into the syntactic structure of the sentence, the sentences are assigned a semantic component of the lexicon,¹ and a systematic phonetic representation by the phonological component of L , thus providing an actual string of sounds for listeners to hear. In this paper I shall show that all of the above processes apply in grammatical sentences such as (1), but not all of them apply to ungrammatical sentences such as (2):

- (1) John poured water from a pitcher.
- (2) *John poured water from a picture.

Sentence (2) is clearly ungrammatical, and as such could not be uttered by an idealized speaker-hearer. The question now arises of how the production of sentences such as (2) is inhibited, and how this inhibition should be formally represented in a grammar.

Recent experiments² have shown that sentences such as (2) are prevented by a blocking transformation from entering the phonological component of the grammar. That is, after entering the semantic component and being blocked by the well-documented PICTURE/POUR constraint (Wassermahlerströmer 1892:50), these sentences undergo a further transformation which blocks assignment of a phonetic interpretation to the production of ungrammatical utterances.

This is accomplished with the prefixing of an asterisk to the formative dominated by the leftmost node of sentences like (2). A universal convention obviously needed in other parts of the grammar (de Asterisco 1566:xviii) states that no sentence whose leftmost node is immediately preceded by an asterisk can be pronounced; it must either be swallowed or enter the graphological component, whence it can appear in a publication on grammar. The existence of this constraint has been suspected for a long time (see, for example, Kateb 1343:0), but until the discovery of the precise nature of the blocking transformation, empirical evidence for its existence has been lacking.³

REFERENCES

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¹ The speaker is thus able to mean what s/he says.

² In a double-blind experiment, 48 idealized speaker-hearers were shown a slide of a man labeled JOHN pouring water from a pitcher, immediately followed by a slide of the same man pouring water from a picture. All but one either produced sentence (1). The one aberrant subject produced the sentence [vi zakt man bilt auf en|ɪf].

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