

## REVIEW ARTICLE AND DISCUSSION

THE LANGUAGE THAT IS NOT. A REPLY TO PROFESSOR TAJSNER

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### 0. Introduction

In Tajsner's reply to my critique I hoped to find some explanation for his dubious academic attitude and disrespect for language data. I found none. Instead, I found references to my emotions and mental states (frustration) – a sign of helplessness in the face of facts, a rhetoric that I will not descend to.

Tajsner criticizes my selective strategy, forgetting that any review is in nature selective because discussing every page of a book would take another book of triple size. In this sense, my present reply will also be selective, particularly as most of Tajsner's rejoinder is a repetition from his book.

Tajsner delineates three areas for discussion:

1. theoretical issues,
2. the data and data collection,
3. treatment of other scholars' research.

### 1. Theoretical issues

I made it quite clear that everyone has the right to pursue whatever line of research he wishes. I also explained that I do not criticize minimalism from inside. I criticized minimalism for rejecting semantics and pragmatics, making linguistic research incomplete. Even if minimalists declare rejection of semantics in their analysis, they introduce it through the back door. In the first place, they must assume that the structures they work with are semantically correct.

Secondly, when they place the focus<sup>1</sup> in sentence final position, they do it for some reason. If it were only a formal decision, having nothing to do with semantics or pragmatics, then the choice of position of the sentence stress would be totally arbitrary.

Some of Tajsner's arguments are based on dishonest misinterpretation of my words. Tajsner paraphrases what I allegedly wrote in the following way: "Why is the sentence stress on *reading* in (1)? Because the noun in (1) is 'given' and *reading* is an item which precedes it. How do we know that the noun in (1) is 'given'? Because it does not carry a sentence stress (or because the speaker intends it to be 'given' and hence does not mark it with sentence stress)." He omitted, I wonder why, my frequent reference to the context (for "given/new") as the determining factor of the speaker's choice of the place of the stress. What his words also imply is that according to him speakers and contexts play no role in language.

A similar question could be asked with regard to the minimalist rule of stress placement: Why is the sentence stress in *The baby disappeared* on *baby*? – because Tajsner put it there in the deep structure. Any other explanation would necessarily require some semantic or pragmatic reflection, lacking which minimalism becomes an exercise in futility. By the way, when criticizing minimalism from the general linguistics point of view, I had the candidness to admit that my knowledge of minimalism is minimal. Tajsner took it upon himself to criticize (he calls it a "mild polemic") cognitive linguistics, but he himself failed to be openly candid about what his credentials in that field were.

## 2. Data and data collection

No matter how Tajsner tries to explain his use of examples, some of them are in "the language that is not". I can only repeat that *Co dźwig uczynił?* is not an utterance that one would use in Polish. Tajsner's use of this example is obviously the result of his rejection of semantics and pragmatics.

He also explains that in the discussion of the discourse *What did Jack do to Jill? Jack brought flowers to Jill*, he may indeed have had in mind the interpretation that Jack threatened Jill with bringing flowers to her, and he brought the flowers to Jill as a punishment. I should have thought that in linguistic discussions we usually consider typical examples with typical meanings. Strange in-

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<sup>1</sup> Tajsner writes that "contrary to what the reviewer implies, the origins of the very notion of focus is not to be sought in the Prague School tradition. Focus was first more explicitly referred to by Halliday (1967)...". He forgets that science is about phenomena, not terminology. As a phenomenon, FSP is most often ascribed to Mathesius, though it is possible to find traces of its description in earlier studies (Barsov 1783-88; Weil 1844), naturally in different framework and terminology.

terpretations are customarily explicitly marked as unusual. Since Tajsner did not mark this discourse as unusual, the natural assumption was that it has a common, typical interpretation, with flowers being rather a nice gift than a weapon. If the latter interpretation was indeed intended by Tajsner, I can only conclude that we live in different worlds.

Tajsner frowns in his reply on the methodology of my experiment. It may have escaped his notice that I used exactly his discourses. The discourses were both read and interpreted by native speakers. My methodology stands in sharp contrast to Tajsner's methodology described in his rejoinder. He *himself* read the discourses to native speakers and asked them for comments. *Participating actively himself* in the experiment he used his intonation in the way he intended, even if subconsciously, and, what a surprise!, he got the results he "expected". Obviously, Tajsner does not realize that such a subjective procedure is against the most fundamental principles of experimentation – just another piece of evidence of the minimalists' contempt for data and data gathering.

### 3. Omission of earlier studies

The sin of omission of earlier, substantial research is probably the most serious of academic sins. Of course, there are various shades of "imitation", the extreme end of the scale being plagiarism.

Referring to his earlier book (1998) Tajsner admits to knowing my research. Originally (personal communication) he explained his omission in terms of "common knowledge". In his rejoinder he added a new angle – a possibility of his own "independent research" findings.

In the rejoinder he makes a distinction between *type* and *token*, with only the former being in the scope of interest of minimalism. That is to say, that minimalism is interested in the formal structure while disregarding the lexical content. This looks like bad news for Tajsner, because, as I observed in my critical review, the only aspect that distinguishes Tajsner's and my examples is the vocabulary, the structural types are the same. Whether Tajsner has taken these types from my work or not is impossible to decide, but in view of the fact that he admitted to knowing my research, the "independent research" explanation sounds quite naïve. His story is also hard to believe in view of the fact that he makes references to single earlier studies by other authors, and omits my two books and some 30 of my articles on the very subject of focus.

In the same vein he writes that he did not have to make reference to works discussing the Polish example *Ciełę widzi kurczę* (the same form of Nom. and Acc. of both nouns), because for him "it is obvious that such sentences must have been discussed hundreds of times before." I asked a professor of Polish linguistics, a syntactician, about what Polish grammars say about such struc-

tures. He answered that he could not find even a mention of such structures in grammars (available to him at this point in time) from Krasnowolski (1897) to Wróbel (2001).

In conclusion, Tajsner's "Rejoinder" reveals again all the deficiencies of the minimalist program, rejection of semantics and pragmatics, and disrespect for language data, and his questionable attitude towards earlier research has in no way been explained.