
Title	When in doubt give a long answer
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WHEN IN DOUBT GIVE A LONG ANSWER

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It is a common practice among teachers to demand “complete sentences” in answer to comprehension questions. This practice is objectionable on three interrelated grounds: (i) a pragmatic¹ one, which is concerned with how people actually use language – a matter of *use*; (ii) a grammatical one – a matter of *usage*²; and (iii) thematic grounds, which concern how information is presented in a sentence.

The first objection is easily stated: it is simply that in real life people do not answer in “complete sentences”, unless the question (rather than the questioner) so requires, without some special reason³. This is the case in English, and it is doubtful whether any language could be found where a question such as (1a) would normally elicit a reply like (1b).

- (1a) Who was that pretty girl I saw you talking to in the park yesterday?
- (1b) That pretty girl you saw me talking to in the park yesterday was my sister.

Such a response would be inappropriate, though correct grammatically.

Pupils are prepared to go along with this sort of thing in the lesson in order to humour the teacher, but when real communication is called for (even with the teacher) they will find their own ways of shortening sentences – probably on the pattern of their own mother tongue or in accordance with the inter-language of their classmates. It would be counter-intuitive to do otherwise.

The problem, however, is that there are language-specific rules for deletions⁴ – chunks cannot just be left out as one fancies; and if pupils do not internalise these rules by practice, then they will certainly often produce deviant forms:

- (2a) Did you eat the apples?
- (2b) X Yes, I ate.
- (3a) Can I borrow your comb?
- (3b) X Cannot.

(4a) Have you ever been in an aeroplane?

(4b) X Yes, I ever.

Teaching wrong *use* leads then, paradoxically, to wrong *usage* – our second ground of objection. The rules which have been broken in these examples are syntactic. Roughly, they appear to be: objects cannot be deleted after full verbs, modals require subjects, subjects after “yes/no” must be followed by a verb, etc.

Pragmatic principles (which may be quite universal, i.e. common to many languages) for the omission of unnecessary information will thus be constrained by the syntactic rules of the particular language. These principles (or rules of discourse) will take into account the thematic structure of underlying sentences (i.e. the possible full sentences from which the short forms are derived). Thematic structure has to do with the organization of information or focussing, and our third ground of objection to the demand for “complete sentences” is that this aspect of meaning tends thereby to be ignored.

Let us consider the thematic structure of the following sentence just in terms of *new* and *given* information.

(5) The secretary lost the examination scripts.

What new information is being communicated by this sentence? It may be intended to inform us that it was the secretary who lost the papers. Alternatively, the point may be that it was the examination scripts which got lost. Or again, the speaker may be telling us what the secretary did with the papers. A fourth interpretation might be that it was just the scripts, and not the marks, for example, which were lost. Or the speaker may be explaining that the reason the poor girl got into trouble was because she lost the papers. Finally, the entire sentence may be intended to convey new information, that is, to tell us that what happened was that the secretary lost the examination scripts (and that is why the principal is in such a bad mood today). In short, the written sentence has (at least) six possible interpretations as far as discerning the point of its utterance is concerned, in spite of its propositional content⁵ being quite clear.

Note that the various ways in which we were able to paraphrase (5) in the preceding paragraph indicate that there are ways of re-writing sentences so as to bring out the correct focus of attention. The necessity of doing this where thematic structure would not be evident from the context accounts for some of the differences between written and spoken language.

In speech, the position is happier since intonation will often make things clear. However, matters are still not quite straightforward. This is because *since only one word* (in fact, one syllable) *carries the tonic*⁶ *we do not know whether it is just that element which provides new information or whether it is a larger constituent* (of which that word forms part) *which provides new information*. (6a) – (9a) have the same normal stress pattern and will illustrate this point. The tonic syllable is capitalized and possible new information underlined:

(6a) The secretary lost the examination SCRIPTS.

(7a) The secretary lost the examination SCRIPTS.

(8a) The secretary lost the examination SCRIPTS.

(9a) The secretary lost the examination SCRIPTS.

The focus could just be on “scripts” (the head of the second noun phrase) or it could be on “the examination scripts” (the whole of that noun phrase) or it could be on “lost the examination scripts” (the whole of the verb phrase which contains the second noun phrase). The focus of attention could even be the entire sentence (9a), as explained earlier.

These difficulties do not arise with (10a) or (11a), where the new information is clearly picked out by contrastive stress:

(10a) The secretary LOST the examination scripts.

(11a) The SECretary lost the examination scripts.

Spoken English does, however, have another resource at hand, namely, intonation tunes (or tones) by means of which the speaker can indicate whether or not he considers the information as known to the hearer. For instance, “the secretary lost” in (7a) could be said with a fall-rise when the speaker thought it was common knowledge that the secretary had lost something. This will, of course, involve breaking the sentence up into two tone units, each containing a tonic or syllable with nuclear stress. (See Brazil et al (1981), chapters 1 & 3.)

It is interesting to note that there are conventional questions which will clearly bring out the six possibilities that we have been discussing⁷:

(6b) Which examination things did the secretary lose?

(7b) What did the secretary lose?

(8b) What did the secretary do?

(9b) What happened?

(10b) What did the secretary do with the examination scripts?

(11b) Who lost the examination scripts?

Our original “complete sentence” then can be an answer to six different questions, though it is not necessarily a response to such an actual question – it may occur on its own or as part of a narrative. Correct stressing and intonation will eliminate some of the possibilities: for instance, (10a) could not be answer to (6b). But (6a) could be an answer to (6b), (7b), (8b) or (9b), since it would be phonologically identical to (7a), (8a) and (9a), if uttered with a single intonation contour. There is no guarantee, moreover, that all Singaporean teachers of English are sufficiently sensitive to the phonology of English (especially under the stress of a classroom situation) to ensure that inappropriate responses, such as (11a) to (7b), are recognised as producing discursal nonsense and rejected.

Now, the shortest possible answers to the above questions *will* bring out the correct thematic structure of the underlying full sentence, provide correct and appropriate answers and relieve teachers of some intonation worries. The short answers to the preceding questions (6b) – (11b) are⁸:

(6c) The scripts.

(7c) The examination scripts.

(8c) Lose/lost the examination scripts.

(9c) The secretary lost the examination scripts.

(10c) Lose/lost them.

(11c) The secretary.

“Complete sentences” are unlikely to answer questions so adequately. This is especially the case with written answers; however, full answers are more acceptable in spoken English than in writing since intonation can, hopefully, make their point clear. The alternative to written short answers is re-wording (e.g. “The secretary → “It was the secretary who lost the examination scripts”). Short answers, on the other hand, always display a more precise understanding (or misunderstanding!) of the question.

There is a further pragmatic point in favour of insisting upon precise short answers. It is that language proficiency involves being able to process language in real time, that is, being able to grasp immediately the point of an utterance and its relation to the context as well as to understand the propositional content of the

sentence used. Regurgitating given information can often be a case of playing for time before making an appropriate response.

Let us bring this article to a close by summarizing its argument. Answering questions with “complete sentences” is frequently a wrong use of language, which in turn leads to wrong forms of language since necessary practice in using correct short forms is not being provided. “Complete sentences” mask whether the question has been precisely understood, unless pupils accurately show this with stressing and intonation or re-wording.

Postscript

This paper has argued for the necessity of practice in giving correct short answers and against producing non-authentic language by demanding complete sentences. However, some questions do require complete sentences. Here the requirement is *intrinsic* rather than *extrinsic* (i.e. artificially demanded by the teacher or the rubric). How questioning can be organized so as to obtain authentic complete sentences is the subject of the following article. Reference can also be made to Jim Madden’s article in *Teaching and Learning* (vol 1, no 1, Aug 1980).

Notes

- 1 *Pragmatics* considers the actual use of language and must have reference to the speaker and hearer and the situation in which a sentence is uttered.
- 2 *Usage vs use* is Widdowson’s distinction. ‘Usage’ refers to what is correct grammatically and semantically; ‘use’ refers to what is appropriate, e.g., “Pass the salt, please” said (out of the blue) to a complete stranger in a restaurant would not be appropriate use. It is now often observed that teachers tend to neglect correct use of English and concentrate on correct usage.
- 3 The full sentence may be taken as having some special pragmatic purpose, e.g., to show exasperation at being asked an unnecessary or impertinent question (“Why did you go down town?” “I went down town to buy a newspaper” = “Don’t you believe me?” or “I’ve already told you” etc.). This phenomenon of giving more information than required is a case of *exploitation* of the normal rule. It *flouts* Grice’s second *maxim of quantity*: “Do not make your contribution more informative than required”; “. . . hearers may be misled into thinking there is some particular *point* in the provision of an excess of information.” Grice (1975), pp. 45–6.
- 4 Corder (1973), pp. 161–3, 348, refers to them as “speaking rules” – after Del Hymes. Corder, oddly, says that they are not rules of grammar.

- 5 The propositional content of a sentence is that part of its meaning which can be understood without knowing who said it or to whom or its occasion of use. A matter of *semantics* rather than of pragmatics.
- 6 The *tonic syllable* has the greatest prominence within a tone unit or intonation pattern; it is where a major pitch movement starts (e.g. a falling tone indicating that the information is being asserted as new and not just referred to as already known). The tonic is often referred to as the '*nucleus*', and is usually carried by the final content word.
- 7 This was brought to my attention when reading Clark & Clark (1977), pp. 31–33 and which occasioned the present article.
- 8 It would be interesting to compare the spontaneous short answers of local pupils to our six questions (6b)–(11b). Any classroom teacher could carry out such a small piece of research. The incorrect forms (2b)–(4b) are well attested.

References

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