

As You Read this Essay

will slip in some new thoughts

By William Z. Shetter

Why does this title and subtitle flow so uncomfortably? It wasn't until you read or heard that second line that you realized you had to backtrack and reinterpret that first half, which turns out to have a completely different meaning from the one you were led to think. If your eye movements had been being monitored, it would have shown that your eyes read the subtitle and then darted back to the title to reassess what it really meant. In other words the sentence misled you, or to use a colloquial expression, you were "led down the garden path". This is why momentarily misleading sentences like this are known as **garden path sentences**.

Let's take a closer look at what's going on here, because sentences like these reveal something particularly important about human language. Start with a momentary action such as *The test car crashed against the wall*. This event takes place in a split second, but we can't say or write it without **linearizing** the thought: in any human language, words have to be strung out in time, even if it's only two seconds or so in this case. That seems obvious enough, and normally we're entirely unconscious of this time stretch. Both in speech and in writing we have no choice but to interpret sentences a word at a time, constantly though unconsciously revising our hypotheses about what meaning is developing.

But occasionally this linear interpretation (**parsing**, as it's called) rises to the surface and intrudes on our consciousness. It does this when we hear or read a sentence that momentarily misleads us into interpreting the meaning, only to force us to change our mind when the rest of the sentence joins the procession. Consider this:

The student forgot the solution

is a complete sentence, so we reasonably assume it's finished, but then the rest of it comes along

was in the back of the book.

Hearing or reading that, we now realize that we have to backtrack and interpret the first part quite differently. The sentence is really

The student forgot (that) the solution was in the back of the book.

The misleading character of sentences like this may have a variety of causes. One of the more common in English is illustrated by the sentence we just saw: we have the option of omitting the conjunction *that*. We can say *She told me **that** it was ready*, but we can just as well say *She told me it was ready*. As a result, omission of *that* occasionally makes a noun look as if it were the **object** of a verb, and only the succeeding words make it clear that instead, the noun is really the **subject** of a 'that-less' **subordinate clause**. In other words, a garden path sentence. Here are some comparable examples, with the supposedly complete sentence on the first line and on the second line its real completion that makes us go back and reinterpret the first part.

*I know the words to that song
don't rhyme.
She told me a little white lie
will come back to haunt me.
The cotton clothing
is made of is grown in Mississippi.*

Another cause is as simple as our use of punctuation. We usually don't use a comma unless we feel it to be necessary, with the unintended result, as above, that what looked like an object is really the subject of the next clause, another garden path like that title above -

*While she hunted the deer
ran into the woods.
I kissed Joan and Mary
laughed.
While Agnes dressed the baby
spit up on the bed.
Had he escaped this battle
might have ended differently.*

The fact that nouns and verbs frequently have the same form in English is another source of garden path sentences. What looked like a noun object suddenly switches roles when the rest of the sentence comes along and turns out to be really a verb -

*The man who hunts ducks
out on Saturdays.
The woman who whistles tunes
pianos.
The old man
the boat.*

There are several other sources of the garden path effect, whenever the hearer or reader is forced into a mind change about what part of speech a word is -

*The raft floated down the river
sank.*

*The speculator sold the property
regretted buying it.*

*Helen is expecting next week
to be unusually busy.*

*Fat people eat
accumulates.*

Why is language necessarily linear? Think about the difference between your eyes and your ears. A form of communication that is **visual** such as pictures or sign language can communicate everything at once. The picture of the test car presents the whole event entirely without a time dimension.

Your ears, on the other hand, can only take in information in serial form, however complex this may be at times (such as chords in music). So the linear form that natural language takes is an inescapable consequence of its being **audial**. This holds for writing as well, since it is indeed visual but processed as a strung-out representation of speech.

This article is reprinted with the permission of William Z. Shetter, a retired university professor of foreign language and linguistics at Indiana University. He is the author of Language Miniatures: A Selection of Essays, published at Indiana University.

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