

Is Language a *Language* Language? Part 2

We are going to present a "hands-on" working illustration of the methods of analysis of Noam Chomsky and Heinrich Schenker. Lacking such a demonstration one might get the wrong impression that these are nothing more than abstract theories with little practical value.

The object of our inquiry will be the music and lyrics of an exquisite art-song, the "Song of Freedom", written by the unduly neglected American composer, Custis Wade, in 1895. There is good reason to believe that what I uncovered in 1973 while on a hitch-hiking jaunt around the Canada and the north-eastern United States is the only extant copy of this piece. I'd ended up Hartford, Connecticut on a cold January evening, and took refuge in a downtown Mission called something like the "Open Hearth" Just before turning in for the night I noticed a few sheets of music manuscript paper caught in the springs of the unmattressed bedframe over which I'd thrown my sleeping bag.

After subjecting its' lyric to a thorough Chomskyan analysis, the piano accompaniment will undergo a corresponding Schenkerian analysis. "Liskerian Analysis " will then be applied to elucidate the interconnections of words to notes .





The lyric of Wade's "Song of Freedom is:

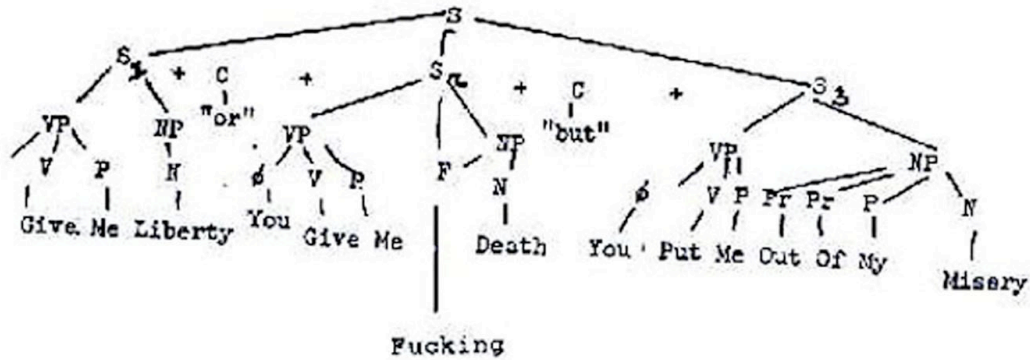
*"Give Me Liberty Or Give Me Fucking Death
But Put Me Out Of My Misery! "*

A Chomskyan parsing tree for this sentence may be constructed after distributing its words into categories which are agreed upon most speakers of English: ¹

¹Friends, colleagues, hypothetical readers, et alia

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Nouns	N	Liberty, Death, Misery
Conjunctions	C	But, Or
Verbs	V	Give, Put
Obscensive (Gerund)	F	Fucking
Pronouns	P	Me, My
Deleted Pronoun	(P)	You
Prepositions	Pr	Out, Of
Sentence	S	
Sub-sentences	S1 , S2 , S3	
Verb Phrase	VP	
Noun Phrase	NP	



Transformational Analysis

To a first approximation the semantic content of this sentence , its "meaning", is invariant with respect to the transpositions of the obscenitive. That there are only two places for the meaningful placement of a comma introduces an element of "ambiguity" into its message. Although the sentiment expressed in the sentence

"Give me liberty or give me fucking death, but put me out of my misery. "

is absolutely clear, the sentence

" Give me liberty, or give me fucking death but put me out of my misery ."

carries the added implication that the speaker wishes to be put out of his/her misery *only if there is no other alternative to*

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liberty than death . There is a third possibility, obtained through the conjoining of these two:

" Give me liberty, or give me fucking death, but put me out of my misery ! "

Which of these intentions is present in Wade's setting? All and none, as we will show.

For our part we find it fascinating - and this is characteristic of English as a whole - that the pronouns 'me' and 'my' can be replaced by other pronouns! (Prenominalization) . This is only possible with some nouns however, and not with others.

Thus :

"Give him liberty or give him fucking death, but put him out of his misery. "

(Give him liberty, or ... etc.)

" Give her liberty or give her fucking death, but put her out of her misery . " ...

" Give us liberty or give us fucking death, but put us out of our misery ." ...

" Give them liberty or give them fucking death, but put them out of their misery. " ...

"Give it misery or give it fucking death, but put it out of its misery ." ...

Everyone of these is acceptable English. Isn't that a remarkable discovery? Worth at least a Nobel Prize or two.

Some care is needed with regard to the pronoun "you" given that it is both present and deleted :

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"Go give yourself liberty or go give yourself fucking death, but (for God's sake) put yourself out of your own misery !"

Nouns are different. The following sentences seem to work. (One must never forget that one is concerned only with the grammatical correctness of the resulting phrase. That fact that chairs, etc., do not normally die is not germane to the analysis.)

" Give that chair liberty or give that chair fucking death, but put that chair out of that chair's misery. "

("Give that chair liberty , or etc.)

" Give General Semantics liberty or give General Semantics fucking death, but put General Semantics out of General Semantics' misery. " ...

It may be stretching it, but we would argue that the following is acceptable English:

" Give 'E = mc² ' liberty or give 'E = mc² ' fucking death, but put 'E = mc² ' out of 'E = mc²' 's misery. "

Nominalization breaks down most notably by regard to the "involutions" or their equivalents. What this means is that the following sentences:

" Give misery liberty or give liberty fucking death, but put misery out of misery's misery. "

" Give fucking death liberty or give fucking death fucking death, but put fucking death out of fucking death's fucking misery. "

can not be accepted as legitimate examples of standard English discourse, either in military academies or finishing schools.

A brief excursion into Symbolic Logic is a prerequisite for the next part of our analysis. The reader is invited to consult either Quine's or Copi's standard textbooks on the subject. We refer to the peculiar "*Or ... But* " copula. This is a magnificent ideational object quite apart from its syntactic structure. Ever since linguistic analysis became the paradigm for the avoidance of substantive issues in philosophy, the subtle intricacies of *Or ...But* have supplied generations of graduate students in philosophy with subject matter for their PhD theses. The very structure of the "*Or ... But*" copula entails a logical paradox, a kind of one-sided Möbius Uroborus biting its own tail.

Transformations from the deep structure allow one to convert any one of these phrases into all the others:

- (i) Either A is black or A is black, but A is black.
- ((ia) Either A is black, or A is black but A is black. , etc.)
- (ii) Either A is black or A is green, but A is red. ,(etc ...)
- (iii) Either A is black or B is black, but C is black . ..
- (iv) Either A is a lemon or B is a cow, but C is in fucking misery.

Following Aristotle, Boole, Frege, Russell and Gödel, all of the above sentences are true in some sense provided all the sub-phrases are true, yet no sensible person would argue that they are equally intelligible. The one that causes the most problems appears to be (ii). We list both forms:

- (iia) Either A is black or A is green, but A is red.
- (iib) Either A is black, or A is green but A is red.

By standard logic, or S-logic, (iia) is valid but (iib) is invalid. By a form of non-standard logic developed in Poland between the wars (N-logic), (iib) is valid but (iia) is invalid. (This is a theorem)

In order to produce a phrase that is valid in both S-logic and N-logic, one must combine both forms in a single phrase coupled by the disjunction "or". In the vocabulary of the Song of Freedom, this becomes:

J: Either I am free or I am fucking dead in which case I am out of my misery, or I am free or I am fucking dead, but I am out of my misery.

J may be called the proper "explication" of the poetry of the Song of Freedom in the language of prose.² It will be employed in the Schenkerian analysis of the notes, particularly with regards to the application of the *fundamental principle* of the cross-relation, *f-f#*, which³ "procreates" the entire masterwork. Observe that the *conjunction criterion for the characterization of similar constituents* (Syntactic Structures, pg. 35) is not satisfied by the original lyric. So that a permutation like

"Give me liberty or put me out of my misery, but give me fucking death." is not acceptable English in academic philosophy or linguistics departments, or anywhere else for that matter.

It is time to turn to the particular characteristics of the structural functions of the obscenitive : *fucking*. It's a member of a large class of words which one may term *quasi-independent*

²Consult Leonard Bernstein's Norton Lectures, 1973

³ Using Schenker's felicitous phrase.

signifiers . Successive transpositions of the word 'fucking' through the lyric reveal that most of the resulting phrases continue to evoke the "Oomph" reaction associated with honest-to goodness English:

(The word "Oomph" will be adjoined to these. The others will be labelled "Negatory")

(1) Fucking give me liberty or give me death, but put me out of my misery. *Oomph*

(2) Give fucking me liberty or give me death, but put me out of my misery! *Oomph*

(3) Give me fucking liberty or give me death, but put me out of my misery. *Oomph*

(4) Give me liberty fucking, or give me death, but put me out of my misery. *Oomph*

(5) Give me liberty or fucking give me death, but put me out of my misery. *Oomph*

6) Give me liberty or give fucking me death, but put me out of my misery! *Negatory*

(7) Give me liberty or give me death, fucking but put me out of my misery. *Negatory*

(7*) Give me liberty or give me death fucking, but put me out of my misery. *Oomph*

(8) Give me liberty or give me death, but fucking put me out of my misery! *Oomph*

(9) Give me liberty or give me death, but put fucking me out of my misery! *Oomph*

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(10) Give me liberty or give me death, but put me fucking out of my misery. *Negatory*

(11) Give me liberty or give me death, but put me out fucking of my misery? *Oomph*

(12) Give me liberty or give me death, but put me out of fucking my misery. *Duh ?*

(13) Give me liberty or give me death, but put me out of my fucking misery. *Oomph*

(14) Give me liberty or give me death, but put me out of my misery fucking. *Oomph*

Sentence (12), though somewhat dubious, would probably be deemed acceptable by most people given the current state of our society. Notice that moving the comma in sentence 7 to its place in sentence 7* changes an incorrect sentence into a correct one.

This little exercise gives support to the conclusion that the obscenitive can be applied almost everywhere. Only in rare instances does the resulting phrase does not correspond to colloquial usage by someone, somewhere.

Obscenitives also have the amazing property that an indefinite number of them may be sprinkled at random through any sentence in standard English sentence to produce another sentence of standard English. Let's imagine that one is entering a low dive or roughneck haunt of drunks and derelicts, on a rainy night. Approaching the bar one hears the following sentence shouted in a loud and uncouth voice:

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"Fucking give me fucking liberty or fucking give me fucking death, but fucking put fucking me out of fucking my fucking misery!"

Summary of the Basic Structural Components of the Song of Freedom

- (1) The quasi-autonomous obscenitive
- (2) The permissible toggle switch $S1 \leftrightarrow S2$
- (3) The forbidden toggle switch $S1 \leftrightarrow S3$ (Consult diagram)
- (3) The enigmatical *Or... But* copula in the light of the famous theorem of non-standard logic of the Polish school.

Each structural component of the lyric is reflected by some feature in the music. A profound Schenkerian analysis will reveal that the extraordinary coherence of this masterwork derives from the skillful employment of Prolongation techniques which carry the 3 symbolic levels of the phrase J into the *Ursatz* of the musical background where, by judicious tampering with the *Bassbrechung* uncouples the *Obscenitive* in the *Urfinie* into individuated *Stufen*.

Schenkerian Analysis of the “Song of Freedom”

Song of Freedom, Curtis Wake: Schenker Analysis

* konstanter Durchgang

The *Urklang* , stated near the beginning, is the chord f-c-d#. Note carefully: *This is a non-diatonic triad* ! Schenker for all his wisdom may not have understood that a wide variety of fundamental noises is available to working composers; that he himself always came up with the same one should not deter us. Despite this, the "Song of Freedom" gratifies the need for coherence demanded by any serious classical opus.

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The unique destiny for this song in the European cultural continuum is to lift the melody from the f_1 in bar 2 to the $f_2^\#$ in bar 9. The primordial origins of this $f/f^\#$ cross - relation in the sub-sub-basement of the song's deep structure will finally be brought to light in the Liskerian analysis. One factor, and one factor only, prevents the melody from resting on this summit indefinitely: *the Great Law of the Obligatory Register* !

Notice the significance of this progression in whole steps: $a_1 - g_1 - f_1 - d_1^\#$. In all the places in which it appears on the Schenkerian diagram it is indicated by the numbers 1,2,3,4.

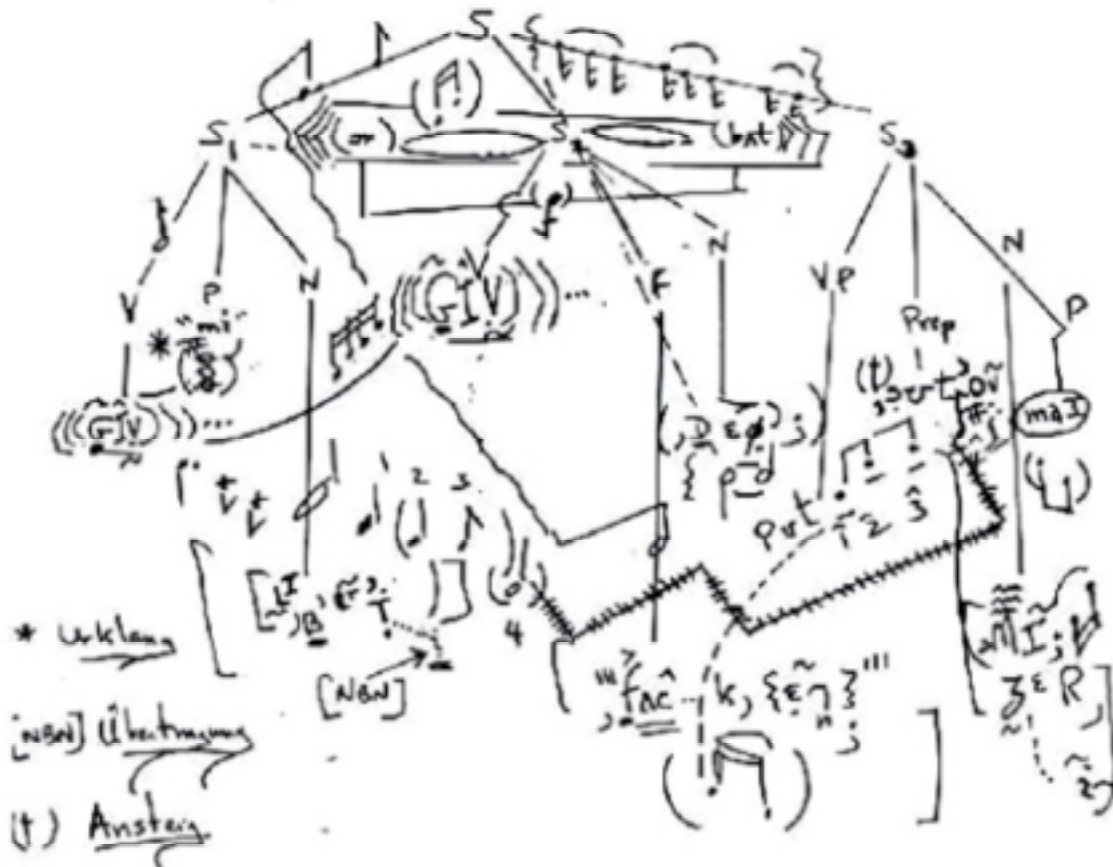
Sometimes one finds carats

\wedge	\wedge	\wedge	\wedge
1	2	3	4

 placed over these numbers, as suits the author's hermeneutic fancies.

This important motif functions at all three levels. In the *MittelGrund* it takes the form of a *Zug* . By a remarkable stroke of genius, the composer *prolongated* it in its *inversion* , (or perhaps *retrograde*) form : $c_2 - d_2 - e_2 - f_2^\#$. The rising progression in 4ths which one finds in the *VorGrund* is simply amazing; I have therefore highlighted it with an exclamation point.

Liskerian Analysis of the Song of Freedom



The logical paradoxes inherent in the "Or...But" copula are indicated by appropriate diacritical marks. The presence of the infinity sign indicates a vicious circle, in life or thought. The anaphoristic repetitions of the word "Give" in the lyric's sentence structure suggest a resonant harmony, which is why they have been encased in reverberating brackets.

One finds that all the words in the diagram of the Liskerian analysis are liberally garnished with diacritical marks invented for the purpose of indicating nuances of accent, pronunciation and diction. The weighty connections between the notes (indicated by thick lines on the diagram) dredge the depths of philosophical, mystical, semantic and aesthetic speculation.

Special attention has been given to the joining of the paired note values of "fucking" to the lone occurrence of the word "put" in the song; this has therefore been indicated by a dotted ligature. Wade reflects the powerful prosody of this concatenation by two devices: (1) the presence of an nearly identical harmonization (D major against any unrelated chord) and (2) the half-step anticipation of the 16th note that precedes each occurrence.

The association of *fucking* with a thoroughly meaningless cross-relation, $f - f\#$ should not be ignored. This must have been a rare moment of inspiration: Wade thus gives "fucking" the treatment it so richly deserves.

The most dramatic effect in the song, to my mind, is the assertion of the $f_2\#$ in bar 9, in violation of the obligatory *Ansteig* and a 500-year tradition of voice leading. The composer wrote $f_2\#$ instead of f_2 because of the imperative nature of the *Zug* in contrary motion, (or perhaps inversion): $c_2 - d_2 - e_2 - f_2\#$. That a composer would deliberately commit such a *faux pas* would not surprise anyone if Wade had studied composition *after* the theories of Heinrich Schenker had permeated the music conservatories.

The fact that his "Song of Freedom" is pre-Schenkerian shows a truly prescient brilliance.



Postscript:

There have been several attempts to relate Chomskyan methods to the analysis to music, though I know of none applying Schenker's methods to language. In 1985 the MIT Press published *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* co-authored by Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff. It is unfortunate that they had not read my essay, which first made its appearance in 1984; it might have persuaded them to withdraw the book.

Leonard Bernstein's appeal to Chomskyan linguistics in the Charles Eliot Norton lectures delivered at Harvard in 1973 stands in a class by itself. As a parody of this body of thought it is at least as effective as this essay itself. The many uses of the *fallacy of misplaced concreteness* one finds throughout all of Chomsky's theorizing (both linguistic and political) are both heightened and relieved by Bernstein's tendentious applications to musical form and content, while his irrepressible sense of humor saves him, and us, from the danger of taking himself too seriously.

One hesitates to call it an unconscious self-parody. One has the sense that Lennie is deliberately pulling the Academy's leg by his promotion of a high-sounding pseudo-scientific verbiage as a way to clothe his own extremely interesting ideas about the relationship of music to language.

And once Bernstein dumps the linguistic metaphors and turns his attention to the actual works of Mozart, Beethoven,

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Wagner, Debussy, etc., the master craftsman takes over and it's sheer excitement from there on in.

