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To cite this article: Jan Anward & Per Linell (2016): On the grammar of utterances: putting the form vs. substance distinction back on its feet, Acta Linguistica Hafniensia, DOI: [10.1080/03740463.2016.1159819](https://doi.org/10.1080/03740463.2016.1159819)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03740463.2016.1159819>



Published online: 05 Jul 2016.



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# On the grammar of utterances: putting the form vs. substance distinction back on its feet

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## ABSTRACT

Recent work in language theory, linguistic typology and usage-based linguistics has actualised the time-honoured distinction between 'form' (or 'structure') and 'substance', which was popular not least during classical European structuralism. This paper reviews some controversies within the theory of form and substance. Current dialogical theories of situated languaging, as well as many variants of functional, cognitive and other usage-based approaches, motivate a perspective shift in the language sciences, assigning primacy to language use ('languaging', 'doing language') rather than to abstract language systems. This gives more weight to 'substance', while it still necessitates the recognition of language structures. This paper makes an argument for a respecification of the relationships between form and substance, or between structuralist and substantialist conceptions, seen in relation to received versions. The empirical data adduced in this paper are drawn from conversational Swedish.

**KEYWORDS** Language system; languaging; form; substance; structuralism; dynamics; dialogue

## 1. Introduction

Is the distinction between form and substance in language theory still as relevant as it seemed to be in the first half of twentieth-century European structuralism? Would language still be exclusively defined by its "inner form"? Or has the primacy of form and formal linguistics been superseded by a kind of "substantialism" promoted by empirical studies of language and language usage, for example, within the fields of language typology and grammatical studies of actual utterances in talk-in-interaction? This paper will use the latter kind of data to probe the issues.

Haspelmath (2015) belongs to those who have argued that substance phenomena have become increasingly more emphasised in several kinds of

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linguistics. He coined the term “substantialism” for this trend. According to him, there are at least three kinds of (pre-)structured substance in the domains of language: (i) phonetic processes (“substance”) provide a basis for phonological structures (“form”), (ii) utterance-building resources and processes in grammar provide for what are possible utterances (these utterances being considered as structured products), and (iii) our environments of nature or culture have inherent structures that could be taken to serve as resources for “content” design in words and grammatical constructions (Croft 2015; Haspelmath 2015). Linguistic structuring adds more form to these substances (in language-specific phonology, actual utterances, and linguistic semantics, respectively). We will deal with some aspects of (ii) later in this paper (Sections 3–4). We will argue that properties of living language speak against fundamental axioms in structuralism.

The layout of this paper will be following. We first present some theoretical and historical background, which will be subdivided into three subsections: the relation between situated languaging and emergent language systems (2.1), the form vs. substance distinction in (European) structuralism and before (2.2), and finally the more recent impact from functionalism, interactionism and dialogism (2.3). We then (Section 3) turn to some empirical data from Swedish conversations (talk-in-interaction), which we take to be of principled interest for the theorisation of languaging at the grammatical level. These snapshots from online languaging will be used for some generalisations about utterance grammars, with special regard to the differences in relation to formal sentence grammars (Section 4). Finally, we wrap up (Section 5) with some conclusions about form and substance.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Two meta-perspectives on language

In the history of linguistics, two main meta-theories as regards the nature of language have competed: the view of language as *abstract objects* (forms), i.e., *signs and sign systems* (language systems), and the view of language as *actions/activities* (languaging). The former has been the dominant view, particularly in linguistics proper.

The primacy of form and formal linguistics that has been advocated by many linguists is related to the distinction between the language system and language usage (in Saussure: *langue* vs. *parole*). Since this terminology suggests that usage is secondary to the language system (which logically must exist beforehand and then “put to use” in particular situations),<sup>1</sup> we prefer the term languaging (Becker 1991), which is derived from an action-verb. Within a dialogical or praxeological meta-theory (Linell 2009; Anward 2015), language is primarily

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, the quote from Chomsky (1964) in section ‘2.2. Form and substance in structuralism’.

*situated languaging* in the world. The activities of languaging are accounted for in a dynamic theory of online actions and processes, and constraints on these. The *first* purpose of this paper is to argue that this reversal of priorities (from abstract language systems to situated languaging) calls for a respecification of notions like form and substance.

The *abstract-objects* view is associated with *formal (sentence) grammars*. Their basic unit is the abstract (i.e., contextless, non-situated, autonomous) sentence, which is a structured sequence of abstract symbols (of a certain structure, usually a clause or a hierarchical, multi-unit structure of clauses), with no temporal properties. One of its core properties is that it can be judged by native speakers to be “grammatical”, i.e., it belongs to a specific language system. In addition, abstract grammar, like in Chomsky’s (1995) minimalist theory, suffers from serious meta-theoretical problems (Dąbrowska 2015).

By contrast, for a *praxeological study* of language the phenomena in focus are situated actions and utterances, and language is primarily a resource for building utterances (and, of course, texts). An utterance (token) is a situated action, evolving in irreversible time. Its core property is situation-appropriateness (the fit with communicative needs and contextual factors), not grammaticality. A *second* purpose of this paper is to show that utterances are fundamentally different from abstract sentence types; some characteristics of “talk-in-interaction” seem very hard to make compatible, if at all, with a radical structuralist approach. The grammar in praxeological and dialogical linguistics should be an *utterance grammar*.

Before proceeding to our main topics, the form vs. substance distinction and the status of utterance grammar, we would like to point out that a dialogical-praxeological language theory cannot entirely do away with a distinction between languaging and language systems. Following, among others, Love (2004), Thibault (2011) and Cowley (2011), we advocate a *first-order* (primary) level of actions/activities and languaging (signings, wordings, etc. for those who wish to have more verb-derivatives) and a *second-order* (secondary) level of utterance patterns but also abstracted linguistic resources such as signs and sign concatenations (words, grammatical constructions, etc.). These are systems of linguistic knowledge “emergent and emerging” (Hopper 2011) from users’ experiences of languaging (as well as from their education and literacy).

## 2.2. Form and substance in structuralism

The terms form and substance in linguistics are related to structure vs. matter, material or resources, respectively.<sup>2</sup> They were central in classical European structuralism, but they had a long history, mainly outside of language studies,

<sup>2</sup>Today, many language scholars talk about substance vs. structure, but we prefer to stick to the terms and concepts of substance and form, despite their occasional ambiguities. The term “structure(s)”, which often appears in the plural, appears to us to be a largely descriptive and neutral term, whereas “form” is abstract and uncountable (although there may be different *kinds* of form).

before that. They are largely derived from the philosophy of Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), who talked about several types of form (*eidos*, ‘image’, ‘schema’, ‘gestalt’, etc.; *idea* ‘idea’: Lat. *forma*) that could be superimposed on or associated with matter/substance<sup>3</sup> (*hylé*, ‘material’; Lat. *substantia*). According to his view, parts of form were inherent in the substance, i.e., the two were aspects of the same complex phenomena. Indeed, one can often imagine a series of steps in the shaping (structuring, designing) of matter (e.g., from clay via bricks to buildings); there is some form from the beginning, but more is added in later steps. Aristotle associated substance with potentiality (something could be made out of it), and form with actuality (e.g., the entities of language as actually contested and used).

Sometimes, concepts and distinctions can be assigned diametrically opposite interpretations. As regards language, we shall only mention one possible perspective shift. A traditional understanding of ‘substance’ and ‘form’ when applied to the sound level of language was to see the phonetic materiality as the substance. This possessed the potentiality of being used in specific ways in the phonologies of different languages. The phonological system was the form that gave structure to the phonetic events hearable as utterances of the specific language. Thus, phonetics was potentiality, and phonology actuality. A rather different conceptualisation appears if we look at the language system as the potentiality, that which constitutes the potentials (or affordances in the sense of Gibson 1979) of the specific language, i.e., the *resources* for building situated utterances. In the light of this, the second-order language (i.e., the abstracted systems), with their meaning potentials of lexical items and grammatical constructions, could be seen as substance, and the situated meanings of utterances would be the actual forms of real languaging. One might suggest that the perspective shift to seeing language structures as potentialities is a consequence of the perspective shift involved in seeing languaging as the primary phenomenon.

If we compare Aristotle to his predecessor Plato (428–c. 348 B.C.) and look for a counterpart to Aristotle’s form in Plato’s philosophy (which is hardly a very straightforward task), we find that Plato inaugurated a tradition in which the “ideas”, the abstract (and for him primary) reality, could be the possible counterpart of form. This was regarded as separated from mundane, tangible objects, phenomena that possessed substance. Plato understood “ideas” (or in our terms: ‘form’) as entirely abstracted from substance, indeed as existing in an “ideal world”. Through the history of philosophy, concepts like these were elaborated, and made more complex, through the addition of other concepts like structure and content, system and realisation, and other distinctions (cf. Lepschy 1969). The Platonic interpretation of form came to dominate in linguistics, particularly in structuralism and generativism. This is the reason why it is necessary to raise his ideas in the context of this paper.

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<sup>3</sup>Despite the Greek origin of the concepts of form and substance, they are usually designated by words derived from their Latin lexical counterparts (*forma*, *substantia*).

Classical structuralism, the time period of Saussure, Trubetzkoy, Jakobson, Coseriu, Hjelmslev and Benveniste (Malmberg 1983), was an epoche when the terms form and substance were used much more frequently than today. Often, the terms were used primarily with regard to phonology and phonetics (see Fischer-Jørgensen 1975; Hjelmslev [1943] 1961; Coseriu 1952). For many, including Hjelmslev (1943), the form–substance distinction was largely parallel to structure (schema) – usage (Fischer-Jørgensen 1975, 122). For him, substance was ‘formed matter’ (Hjelmslev also acknowledged unstructured matter, which he called ‘purport’), while the structure (language as such) was exclusively form. At the same time, Hjelmslev generalised the form–substance distinction to hold for both the expression plane and the content plane of language, despite the fact that these “planes” are hardly parallel.<sup>4</sup> His glossematics included a lot of abstract entities, for example the “empty” units called ‘*cenemes*’. He was radically Platonic.

Many structuralists looked at the nature of language (i.e., the language system) as pure form. Saussure depicted it as “pure values” (Saussure [1916] 1964, 155). Here are a couple of typical quotes from Saussure and Hjelmslev:

La langue est une forme et non une substance. (Saussure [1916] 1964, 169)<sup>5</sup>

Linguistics must attempt to grasp language, not as a conglomerate of non-linguistic (e.g., physical, physiological, psychological, logical, sociological) phenomena, but as a self-sufficient totality, a structure *sui generis*. (Hjelmslev [1943] 1961, 5)

A little later, Chomsky (1964, 52) confirmed this view on the primacy of form:

It seems natural to suppose that the study of actual linguistic performance can be seriously pursued only to the extent that we have a good understanding of the generative grammars that are acquired by the learner and put to use by the speaker or hearer. The classical Saussurean assumption of the logical priority of the study of langue (and the generative grammars that describe it) seems quite inescapable.

Cassirer (1944, 36, *et passim*), just to mention a philosopher outside of linguistics proper, declares that language is form (“symbolic form”, “architectural form” etc., corresponding to Humboldt’s “inner form”; see below). Benveniste (1966–1974), who is known for his interest also in language usage and subjectivity, still gives priority to the form of language.

If we want to summarise the standpoints of classical structuralism, at least the following three come to mind, and they could be understood in terms of the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt ([1841–1852] 1969)<sup>6</sup>:

<sup>4</sup>Expression is the flow of bodily, multimodal behaviours, whereas content concerns the flow of sense-making which involves the relations between the subject (or the participants in interaction), language resources and the world attended-to and talked about. The latter is not internal to language or linguistic behaviour but crucially dependent on contextualisation.

<sup>5</sup>To what extent these notions should be ascribed exclusively to Saussure, or also to his editors is a matter of dispute. For some problematisations, see Thibault (1997).

<sup>6</sup>It should be held in mind that Humboldt (who lived in the years 1767–1835) was not explicitly referred to by the majority of structuralists. His name was reintroduced into linguistics by Chomsky (1965), who – in a rather doubtful way – regarded him as a forerunner of Chomskyan meta-theory.

- (a) the language system (which was the real language *per se*) was pure ('inner') form, an immaterial and idealised reality, with irrelevant aspects of substance eliminated. This is Humboldt's "inner form" and Chomsky's (1988) notion of 'Internal Language' (cf. also the quotes from Saussure and Hjelmslev above). All these conceptions were "Platonic" in nature.
- (b) language as usage (i.e., languaging) was formed or structured substance/matter. Here, form was rather "outer form" in Humboldt's parlance, something which was partly "in the substance" (also an Aristotelian understanding).
- (c) form and substance were associated with potentiality (Lat. *potentia* 'possibility'; Med. Lat. also *potentialitas*) vs. actuality (*actus* 'action', a nominal derived from *agere* 'to do, act'; Med. Lat. also *actualitas*).

To wit, there is a minority standpoint in classical European structuralism, which takes *parole*, or practice, as primary. This standpoint was best formulated by Karcevski (1929), who takes his points of departure in Saussure's dictum that "la langue est nécessaire pour que la parole soit intelligible et produise tous ses effets; mais celle-ci est nécessaire pour que la langue s'établisse; historiquement, le fait de parole précède toujours." (Saussure [1916] 1964, 37)), as well as in Saussure's discussion of signs as both mutable and immutable (Saussure [1916] 1964, 106ff)). Karcevski develops a conception of langue as a dynamic system, driven by the need of languaging to adapt to ever new circumstances (see also Marková 2003, 76–78; Anward 2015, ch. 4). However, this standpoint never became influential.<sup>7</sup>

### 2.3. Interactionism and functionalism: doing language

In recent decades many language theories have turned to interactionism, or at least functionalism, which has implied a great deal of "substantialism" in Haspelmath's sense. As we already pointed out, this has presupposed (or entailed) important perspective shifts. Here is a typical, programmatic statement from a different, though related tradition (integrationism):

For the integrationist, a language is a second-order cultural construct, perpetually open-ended and incomplete, arising out of the first-order activity of making and interpreting linguistic *signs*, which in turn is a real-time, contextually determined process of investing behaviour or the products of behaviour (vocal, gestural or other) with semiotic significance. (Love 2004, 530)

Such a statement amounts to a position opposite to that of structuralism and generativism. The nature of language is now attributed to (inter)activities (actions, languaging; cf. Anward 2015; notion of "doing language") rather than

<sup>7</sup>American structuralism was partly very different from European structuralism. Many Americans held that the task of the linguist was to discover regularities (stable 'habits') in verbal behaviour (Harris 1951; Fries 1952). This is of course a substantialist standpoint, although 'verbal behavior' is quite an impoverished alternative to languaging.

abstract symbols (such as abstract system sentences in the sense of Lyons 1977, 29). Language systems are seen as emergent from, rather than underlying, languaging. Utterances will be seen as the dynamic products of creative (though, admittedly, often routinised) practices. They are no longer simply imperfect derivatives or even copies (tokens) of abstract system sentences (types).

Such ideas may be hard to unify with the above-mentioned version of the form vs. substance dichotomy. However, we could perhaps find something relevant in Humboldt's ([1841–1852] 1969) threefold conceptualisation, in which substance was associated with actuality (and not primarily with realised tokens) and form with potentiality (and not primarily with abstract structure). Where substance is concerned, Humboldt offers a twofold distinction. We are thinking first and foremost of his two famous concepts of (i) *energeia*, which is the *activities* realising aspects of language in utterance production (and understanding), a kind of *actuality*, and (ii) *ergon*, the utterances as the *finished products* of events of languaging, also a kind of actuality. But Humboldt added a third phenomenon, corresponding roughly to the level of form, that of (iii) *dynamis*, the mental power generating the dynamic potentialities of the language faculty, which was seen as system(s) of components (Humboldt 1969, xxxiii, 48–49), and constituted the *power* (capability) of the language system to provide material (resources, affordances, potentialities) for users' cognitive and communicative activities (sense-making) in languaging. Languaging is primary to the (second-order) language system (cf. the quote from Love above), and the latter cannot consist of abstract sentences but of more dynamic linguistic resources. In the remainder of this paper, we suggest that a proper understanding of the dynamics of situated utterance-building will make the notion of abstract sentences irrelevant (except in some genres)<sup>8</sup> and the structuralist view of form vs. substance insufficient. We will contend that the facts of real utterances demands a respecification of the distinction somewhat along the lines of Humboldt, as suggested above.

### 3. Some phenomena in situated languaging

We will now proceed to some examples of utterances that are situated in time and social space. Our examples include (i) conversational constructions that usually don't appear in formal grammars or in normative textbooks, because they have been regarded as ungrammatical, despite the fact that they are perfectly functional in spoken interaction and never subject to repair or correction; (ii) constructions which cannot be understood as autonomous sentences (which are the largest units in traditional syntax), because they are always locally responsive, i.e., they can occur only as responses to particular kinds of prior utterances; (iii) utterances which exhibit what seem to be internal contradictions, or at least

<sup>8</sup>Linell (2005) argues that there has been a "written-language bias" in traditional and structuralist linguistics, which – among many other things – assigned primacy to written expository prose over situated talk-in-interaction.

several competing parsings; (iv) utterances with syntactic ambiguities whose parsings change over the course of their incremental production.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.1. A first example: negation+XP-initiated utterances and pivot utterances

The production of an utterance is “dialogical”, interdependent with others’ actions and utterances, by being responsive to prior utterances, and projective of possible next utterances. If utterance-building takes place in real time, then it would be natural to assume that the sedimented knowledge of grammatical constructions are primarily methods to build actions in real time, and they would therefore reflect the progression in irreversible time. In the empirical part to follow, we will try to provide some applications of this reasoning.

In question-answer sequences in Swedish conversations it happens that some answers contain instances of a construction with an initial negated phrase followed by a finite clause, as in (1–2)<sup>10</sup>:

(1) (From a radio phone-in program, in which questions about flatfish are raised by a caller (C) and answered by an expert (E), among them the question if these fish are asymmetric from birth)

1 C: så plattfiskarna e inte platta från början?  
 then flatfish-PL-DEF are not flat-PL from beginning-DEF  
 ‘so the flatfish aren’t flat from the beginning?’

2 E: nä inte från början e dom inte de  
 no not from beginning-DEF are they not that  
 ‘no not from the beginning they aren’t’

(2) (From a radio interview with a person (F) with a physical disability)

1. I: å vilken hjälp har du fått?  
 and what help have you received  
 ‘And what help did you get?’

<sup>9</sup>Note that here we restrict our discussion of form vs. substance to grammar (syntax), and leave phonology and lexical semantics aside.

<sup>10</sup>Our examples will be drawn from Swedish conversations. We will use three different kinds of layout, indicating the qualities of our data:

(a) *Courier New* will be used for authentic conversational data which have been technically recorded or noted down, with prosodies and colloquial reductions. We use transcriptions commonly adopted in Swedish interactional linguistics for this data (see Anward and Nordberg 2005). Parentheses, e.g., (han höll ut armarna), within transcripts indicate transcriber’s uncertainty. Focal stresses are indicated by underlining the vowel sign of the stressed syllables (e.g., början). CAPITALS indicate louder volume (e.g., DE), and °° surround words whispered or spoken at a low volume (e.g., °man vill°).

(b) *Italics* with conventional orthography will be used for authentic and attested data, noted down without recording and notes about prosody.

(c) Non-recorded variations of constructions will occasionally be used; these constructed variants are numbered with apostrophes in the number, e.g., (6b’).

2. F:   inte jättemycke   hjälp   har   ja   inte   fått.  
          not   awfully.much   help   have   I   not   received  
          ‘Not awfully much help I haven’t got’

Linell and Norén (2014) analysed a number of such examples drawn from a collection of authentic turn sequences in Swedish conversations.<sup>11</sup> Questions of the type involved in such sequences could have been answered by stand-alone negated phrases, corresponding to the bold-faced phrases above (and particles preceding them, as in (1)). In other words, the bold-faced initial negation plus the X-phrase could have constituted a sufficient, immediate and “elliptic” response to the prior question in both (1) and (2). It is therefore natural to interpret what follows the bold-faced segments (the finite clauses continuing the initial parts and treating these as the fundamentals of the emergent clauses) as increments added on to the initial phrase (the bold-faced part which could have functioned as an “elliptic” answer). However, the increments are usually prosodically integrated with the initial segments, which could be taken to imply that the whole utterance instantiates a construction of its own. (Yet, there are also examples in which the added clause comes after a micropause after the negated phrase.)

A first observation on the utterances with Neg+XP (the “elliptic” variant) or Neg+XP+Finite-clause (the variant in focus here) is that they are *strictly responsive*; they can only occur as responses to prior contributions (often questions, sometimes statements). These prior utterances often contain constituents that are repeated in the responses (*från början* in (1), *hjälp* in (2)). The property of obligatory responsivity is rather frequent in conversational constructions (see also Section 3.2), but it is surely a reason why many of these constructions are marginalised or omitted altogether from grammars based on autonomous sentences.

Another noteworthy property of the Neg+XP+Finite-clause construction is that it contains double negations, one *inte* ‘not’ before the XP (usually a noun phrase or prepositional phrase), and one in the increment. It defines the scope of the negation, and excludes an unlimited affirmation of a potential proposition; the fish *are* flat but *not* from the beginning (1), and the person *may* have received some help but *not* very much (2). The increment with the second negation confirms or specifies what this elliptic segment, considered as a response, claims. But logically the second negation is in a way superfluous, and the whole construction is grammatically awkward (at least from the perspective of a standard written-language-based grammar). Interestingly, there are cases in which the second negation is omitted, as in (3):

<sup>11</sup>The majority of the items in this collection have been noted down from informal conversations and interviews broadcast in radio or television. The construction NegXP+Finite clause is relatively uncommon, since “elliptic” answers (without increment clauses) are the unmarked case. The collection now consists of 50 cases (including full-fledged pivot utterances).

(3) (TV interview about a financial crisis in 1992, broadcast again in 2004; a journalist (J) ask questions of a financial expert (E))

1. J: klarar ni av den här räntan?<sup>12</sup>  
 cope-PRES you with this here interest-DEF  
 ‘can you cope with this interest rate?’

2. E: inte nån längre tid gör vi de  
 not a longer time do-PRES we it  
 ‘Not for any longer time we will do it’

The cases *without* doubled negations represent 18% [9/50] of our data. Maybe there is a slight difference relative to the majority of cases (with doubled negation as in (1–2)); here, the country, according to the expert E, *will* cope with the interest rate (“we do it”), but not for a long time.<sup>13</sup>

An elliptic answer, i.e., just negation (‘not’) plus the negated phrase, sounds perfectly grammatical. It is the continuation that introduces awkwardness; neither alternative, with or without a second negation, would appear in standard written prose. In fact, the variant with double negation, the overwhelmingly most deployed alternative, is reminiscent of a much more common phenomenon, that of pivot utterances. Interestingly, Lindström (2013) has suggested an analysis of negation+XP-initiated utterances with double negations as a pivot construction.

A pivot utterance (*apo koinou*; Norén 2007) is one in which the beginning constitutes (part of) one syntactic structure and the end (part of) another syntactic structure, the two being grammatically overlapping and incompatible according to standard written-language-based grammar. Excerpt (4) contains an example:

(4) (From a sing-song show in Swedish television; C = compère)

1. C: deras konsert °om man vill veta de° den går i svensk  
 2. teve (.) den femte augusti sänds de

Pivot utterances embody transitions, often seamless, from a first structure (in (4): *deras konsert (...) den går i svensk teve (.) den femte augusti* ‘their concert (...) it will appear on Swedish TV (.) on the fifth of August’) to the second structure (*den femte augusti sänds de* ‘on the fifth of August is it broadcast’) via a so-called *pivot* (a bridging part that is common to the two structures: *den femte augusti* ‘on the fifth of August’). In (4), the pivot is preceded by a micro-pause (the speaker may have needed a moment to recall the right date).

<sup>12</sup>The Bank of Sweden inaugurated an interest rate of 500% for a short period in 1992.

<sup>13</sup>The likelihood of only one initial negation – as in (3) – may thus depend on the content of the utterance. Intuitively, one could imagine such a variant of (2), but less probably of (1).

Pivots have syntactic relations with both pre-pivot and post-pivot, but the whole construction is not syntactically coherent. Traditional grammars have not acknowledged such incoherencies, and therefore not considered them as part of the language system. This is so despite the fact that pivot utterances are quite frequent and completely normal in conversational language in Swedish and many other languages (Norén and Linell 2013).

To conclude this subsection, we observe that all four properties mentioned at the outset of Section 3 have been exemplified: (i) the construction of Neg+XP+Finite clause is on the border of being excluded as ungrammatical, (ii) the construction is shaped as a local response; it cannot occur unless there is a previous utterance, usually a question, to which it provides a response, and the XP expression (or parts thereof) often occurs already in this question (e.g., *från början* in (1)); (iii) it is the result of competing tendencies (providing a straightforward brief response, and adding a confirming or specifying continuation), (iv) the grammatical relations within the utterances are partly changed as a consequence of the additions. The points (i, iii, iv) also hold for pivot utterances in general.

These four properties demonstrate the inadequacy of sentence grammars, but it is important to point out that they have been established among the resources (potentialities, substance in the Aristotelian sense) of the language to be accessible as routinised solutions to recurrent communicative problems, namely for (ii) marking local response, (iii) double utterance functions (brief response, specifying continuation) and (iv) change of strategy. It is only when we apply the dynamic utterance perspective that we see their substantial role in languaging.

### 3.2. Responses initiated with *de e/va* (*det är/var*) 'it is/was'

Having introduced some phenomena using the previous examples, we will now apply them to some rather different data. We will focus on some utterance types in Swedish that are initiated by the general 3. person pronoun *de* (in writing: *det*) 'it, that' followed by a copula *e/va* (in writing: *är/var*) 'is/was'. *De e/va* is a neutral way to start an utterance or turn.<sup>14</sup> Allwood (1999) has established that *de e/va* is the most frequent collocation of all in Swedish spoken language, and Forsskähl (2009) proposed that *de e/va* is a powerful conversational resource, perhaps qualifying as one (or several) construction(s) in the language system. We will focus on *de(t) e/är/va(r)*-initiated constructions, mostly with *att* ('that')-complements, as in (5a–b). Such configurations are more widespread in talk, but other constructions with *de e/va* (e.g., *it*-cleft, presentation constructions) are common in some written genres as well. Here are a few examples (from Engdahl 2010) of the construction that we want to discuss:

<sup>14</sup>The English *there is* (or Danish *der er*) also corresponds to *de(t) e/är* in standard Swedish.

- (5a) *Det var bra att du sa.*  
it was good that you said  
'It was good that you said (that)'<sup>15</sup>
- (5b) *Det var det bra att du sa.*  
it was It good that you said  
'It was good that you said (that)'

In these utterance types, there is no overt object in the embedded *att*-clause, but the matrix clause contains one or two instances of *det* 'it'. This is a defining characteristic of the construction (see further below).<sup>16</sup> The variant exemplified here may be schematically described as *de e* [Eval Adj] *att* S (...) (with the embedded S lacking an overt object).

Engdahl (2010, 2012) was the first to discuss these utterance types (let us call them "Engdahl's construction(s)").<sup>17</sup> She describes *de e/va* as an appropriately underspecified construction, and therefore useful in utterance beginnings. It creates unresolved dependency relations, which have to be resolved later in the utterance (Engdahl 2012, 128). Whereas Engdahl's examples are usually cited without context, we will use such utterances to point out some other pragmatic properties that are quite characteristic of (especially) dialogical-interactional languaging.<sup>18</sup> (6) is an authentic conversational example noted down by us:

(6) Speaker A explains how her father behaved as he and his children approached a street with heavy traffic:

1. A: (han höll ut armarna så att barnen inte skulle  
he held out arms-DEF so that children-DEF not would  
'He held out his arms so that the children would not
2. springa ut i gatan.)  
run out into street-DEF  
'run out into the street'
3. B: de var ju bra att han gjorde.  
it was PART good that he did  
'It was of course good that he did that'

<sup>15</sup>In the Swedish originals (of 5a–b, 6a, and others) there is no explicit object in the *att*-clause, but we have added 'that' within parentheses in the translations.

<sup>16</sup>In another utterance type, the subordinate clause does have an object: (5c) *Det var bra att du sa det.* 'It was good that you said that', but this is not an example of our construction. In addition, there are "elliptic" subject-less variants with only a predicate (e.g., *bra* 'good'), lacking both the initial *det* and the copula: *Bra att du sa.* 'Good that you said (that)'. This particular example is not included in Engdahl (2010), and we will not specifically treat this variant here.

<sup>17</sup>Her collection consists of about 40 examples noted down or tape-recorded (Elisabet Engdahl, pers.comm.).

<sup>18</sup>These features were not focused in Engdahl's (2010, 2012) analyses.

For clarity, we reproduce here line 3 (“Engdahl’s construction”) in a slightly simplified form for our upcoming discussion:

- (6) a. *de va bra att han gjorde.*<sup>19</sup>  
‘it was good that he did (that)’

And here are some other options with regard to responding to A’s telling in lines 1–2 in (6)<sup>20</sup>:

- (6’) b. *bra (gjort).*  
‘well done’  
c. *de va bra (gjort).*  
‘it/that was well done’  
d. *DE va bra att han gjorde.*  
(same linear order as in (6a), but with emphatic stress on the initial *de*)  
‘THAT was good that he did’  
e. *de va bra att han gjorde de/DE.*  
‘it was good that he did that/THAT’  
f. *de va de bra att han gjorde.* ‘that was it good that he did’  
g. *\*de va DE bra att han gjorde.*

A first observation is that these utterances respond to a prior action or utterance; they are “second-positioned”. Some, in particular Engdahl’s construction (6a), can *only* be “strictly responsive”, i.e., it must occur after another utterance (e.g., 6: lines 1–2), whereas for example (6’b) can be a comment to a non-verbal action outside of the conversation.

Again, there is an opportunity for a brief response (6’b–c), or one that is expanded by a that-clause (6a, 6’d–f). However, in (6) line 3 is delivered as one integrated utterance, with no internal pause or prosodic dip. But this can occur in other cases, such as (7’) below.

(7) K is a social worker serving in a rehabilitation team, here commenting on something the occupational therapist has just said (not reproduced here) (from Lundgren (2009, 185), discussed in Linell 2011, 258; and in Engdahl 2012)

1. K: *de tycker ja va trevligt att du sa.*  
that think I was nice that you said  
‘I think it was nice that you said that’

Speakers often produce variants (7’) (which is here a made-up example):

(7’) 1. K: *de tycker ja va trevligt. (.) att du sa.*

<sup>19</sup>Here and in the subsequent variants (6’b–g) the particle *ju* is omitted, because it is irrelevant to the issues to be discussed. However, this does not mean that it was superfluous in (6); it was not, since A had previously said that she was embarrassed by her daddy’s conduct. Somewhat teasingly B suggests that A ought to have appreciated his actions. B is therefore offering a mild objection in line 3.

<sup>20</sup>Of these only (6’d, f) are examples of our basic construction, and (6’g) is impossible. Compare also note 16.



an initial *de* which may be seen as anaphoric (with reference to whatever parties have just been talking about). However, this part is open to different analyses; *tycker ja* can be seen as a parenthetic *verbum cogitandi*-phrase with an adverbial function, or the whole piece can be seen as an elliptic version of *de tycker ja (att) de va trevli* ‘I think it was nice’, in which analysis the initial *de* ‘it’ suddenly comes out as an expletive place-holder and possibly subject of *va trevli* ‘was nice’. Now note what the increment (*att du sa*) does in terms of retroconstructing the preceding part<sup>21</sup>; the initial *de* acquires the double identity well known from (6a) and (5a): both an expletive place-holder and a topicalised constituent from a subordinate *att*-clause. However, in the latter function it is linked to the object function of *du sa*, rather than the subject function of *va trevli*. This illustrates the possibility of changes of syntactic (inter)dependencies in the temporal course of production of an utterance. New ways of grammatical parsing become necessary.

Let us give another example of this phenomenon. We noted earlier that *de* in (6a) is syntactically ambiguous, both expletive and anaphoric. Now note that there is a variant of this, produced with a pause before the *att*-clause:

- (6') a. *de va bra. (.) att han gjorde.*  
 ‘It was good. (.) that he did (that)’

The “afterthought” (cf. above) added after the pause retroactively makes the reference of the unspecified initial *de* more clear. Before the increment (that will follow the pause) has been made, the initial *de* (in *de va bra*) is possibly only anaphoric (and this part is not strictly necessarily responsive (second-positioned) in Linell’s, 2003, sense). However, in and through the increment, as if it were a delayed addition of an *att*-clause, the initial *de* becomes both anaphoric and expletive, and the whole utterance becomes strictly responsive. We can thus see that an optional incrementation, made in the course of the utterance’s production, can *retroactively change syntactic functions* of prior constituents.

By contrast, in (6'f) the first *de* seems to be only anaphoric (topicalised), whereas the second *de* (in the mid field, or Spec, TP in Engdahl 2012, parlance) is expletive. Note that in (6'f) the *att*-clause is obligatory; the speaker cannot stop the utterance after *bra*, and there is no (6'f) counterpart of (6'f):

- (6'') f. *\*de va de bra. (.) att han gjorde.*  
 ‘It was good. (.) that he did (that)’

In other words, a construction beginning with *de(t) va(r) de(t) bra* has to be followed immediately by the anticipated *att*-clause, and the whole utterance realises a construction that is strictly locally responsive. (6a) can have a bisegmented production (6'a): short response (*de va N/Adj*) + prosodic boundary

<sup>21</sup>When there is a pause before the *att*-clause (cf. 7'), the likelihood of a final *de(t)* after *sa* increases.

(which can be made into a closure) + clause increment. In the asterisked (6'f) above, by contrast, there can be no internal pause and closure, and the whole utterance must be obligatorily prosodically integrated.

#### 4. Accounting for situated languaging: online syntax and utterance grammar

We have proposed that languaging holds primacy over language systems, and that utterances are the primary units, at least in spoken, interactional language. This meta-perspective calls for a study of the life of utterances, rather than merely a taxonomy or a model of lifeless sentences lacking temporal extension and even substantial properties. In a dynamic online (and dialogic) grammar, many syntactic configurations can and must be described in other terms than in a static, formal structuralist grammar. Accordingly, we are faced with the conceptual difference between formal sentence grammars, and dynamic utterance grammars (see Section 2.1).

Sentences in sentence grammars are tidied-up linguistic expressions represented at several, quite abstract levels. By contrast, an utterance grammar assumes that actual (interactional, spoken) languaging is primary (“first-order”). Utterances are communicatively relevant, situated actions that take place in irreversible time.

Barring some exceptional conditions, members of a language community do not use unique utterances as models. Instead, they have extracted utterance patterns (“constructions”) from languaging that can be used as methods for building novel (often slightly different) utterances.

Constructions, or syntactic patterns (“schemas”), are potentialities, and when they are imposed on the unfolding situated utterances, these become actualities. The vocal gestures can then be recognised by those who are competent in the language; in Hjelmslev’s terminology we could talk about “structured matter”.

Among the structures commonly assigned to utterances in utterance grammars is the division into “fields” or “phases”, such as “(pre-)front, initial, mid, end, post-end” phases (after Schegloff 1996 with some revisions of terminology) or in Scandinavian topological analysis (Diderichsen 1946; SAG 1999; Lindström 2008). It is often hypothesised that such phases are the loci of characteristic subactivities in the production (and understanding) of the utterance. Several of our previous example constructions are defined by characteristic (pre-)front or initial field properties.

“Dislocated” expressions in “peripheral” (pre-front, post-end) phases are usually single and grammatically unintegrated words and phrases rather than clauses. However, many stand-alone utterances do not have the shape of (full) sentences either (Laury 2008). Instead, they may consist of words or phrases, or “fragments”, conjoined in ways that have been dubbed as ungrammatical. In

fact, some utterances are “composite utterances”, i.e., composed of both vocal parts and gestural, postural (etc.) parts (Enfield 2009).

Such facts may reduce the attraction of sentence grammars. But in this paper, we have adduced some phenomena which seem to us even more problematic for abstract sentence grammars. These are:

(a) *Responsivity*, i.e., many utterances occur primarily or even exclusively as (second-positioned) responses. Many of them have “elliptical” properties, while another group of responsive constructions are so-called reactive constructions, designed to problematise or relativise the choice of words in prior utterances (Linell 2011; Linell and Mertzluft 2014). Indeed, many grammatical constructions are *strictly locally responsive* in that they can occur *only* in second position, and they often presuppose quite particular structural properties in their prior (first-positioned) utterances.

Formal sentence grammars treat sentences as isolates, as independent units without necessary contexts. Such a grammar cannot account for the “external syntax” involved in (strict) responsivity. Of course, the grammar theory might acknowledge non-sentential syntactic units, but then it would have to give up its assumption that independent sentences are the only units of grammar.

(b) *Incrementality*: Utterances, which are realisations of constructions, are produced bit by bit, often with interspersed pauses and prosodic dips. One common pattern is that the speaker starts by providing a straightforward response to a prior question or assertion, the response often involving a pronominal subject (typically *det*, see Section 3.2). Another possibility of responding is by repeating words from a prior utterance, often in a contrastive fashion (Section 3.1). Initial structures are then continued by the speaker’s addition of more material, not seldom building finite clauses (Sections 3.1 and 3.2). Such practices are examples of *incrementation*; utterances are not fully planned from the beginning, but are built in a stepwise manner, by “increments” (Linell 2013). Typically, a speaker in an impromptu conversation does not know, at least not exactly, beforehand how his impending or ongoing utterance is going to end.

As several of our examples show, the later addition of increments may – under certain circumstances – cause the whole utterance to *end up in an incoherent syntactic structure*, as judged from conventional sentence grammar. However, the awkwardness of most of these utterances does not trigger repair or correction on the part of participants.

To the extent that grammarians consider grammaticality to be a fundamental or definitional aspect of inclusion in a language, they will have problems with boundary cases hinted at in this section. At least early generations of generative grammar would be troubled by this. A dynamic utterance grammar must admit that languages have fuzzy boundaries.

(c) *Syntactic ambiguities*, i.e., double or multiple internal relations and interdependencies between a given constituent (e.g., *de(t)*) and other constituents of

the utterance are also rather common phenomena, and sometimes the result of incrementation. Syntactic and pragma-semantic *properties may change in the course of the progression of an utterance* (see also Engdahl 2012, 124).

The changing functions of *de(t) är/var* in some of our utterance types cannot be explained in a non-ad hoc manner using rules and constraints of any formalist sentence-grammar. *De(t) är/var* is a dynamic and common introduction that leaves space for several different grammatical constructions as subsequent continuations. It is a flexible resource that is useful especially in situations of undecidedness, i.e., in the beginning of utterances.

These are just a few examples of phenomena regularly occurring in the life of utterances. A model based on determinate and static, “grammatical” formal sentences cannot account for the dynamics of activities that are built up by installments and even change directions in the course of production. Yet, we would not deny that certain dynamic features of languaging, for example, the incremental building of certain utterance types and the in-course changes in syntax and some of their pragma-syntactic ramifications, can be successfully handled by formalisation. The Dynamic Syntax of Kempson, Meyer-Viol, and Gabbay (2001) may be a case in point.

In general, participants’ activities and engagement in the resolution of situated cognitive and communicative projects are more basic than linguistic abstractions. Languaging does not appear to be a formal object, just as the activities of, say, walking, having sex with somebody or painting a picture do not involve manipulating formal objects or applying formal rules. Instead, languaging is temporally distributed, embodied signalling and signing. Formalisation becomes much more justifiable when we need to develop algorithms for computational purposes, or even just deal with standardised written language (Linell 2005). In fact, there are genres of written language, e.g., in logic and mathematics, that invite kinds of radical formalisations.<sup>22</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

Compared to Parsons (1937), Garfinkel (1967) performed a thorough respecification of structure vs. action in sociological theory (cf. Heritage 1984). Within language studies a corresponding perspective shift from language system to languaging, and a consequential respecification of the form vs. substance dichotomy have been necessary and hence proposed here. Ultimately, the form–substance distinction concerns the relationship between language structures

<sup>22</sup>We look upon formalisation in linguistics as a result of linguists’ representational actions being applied to language data (Linell 2006). These actions transform temporal processes into abstract, static objects. We do not deny that such operations are useful for certain purposes, but they do not entail that language, especially languaging, consists of formal objects.

and situated languaging. Obviously, a full discussion of this issue is far beyond the scope of this article. However, Du Bois (2014) and Anward (2015) have provided dialogical, interaction-based ideas about the mechanisms of emergence of language structures and abstractions from the practices of languaging.<sup>23</sup> Partly new structures and usages are created by analogy (Anttila 1977; Lavie 2003) with utterance exemplars or, more often and more realistically, with utterance types (patterns), many of which are conventionalised as constructions (Anward 2015). On the former point, Du Bois (2014, 388) and Anward (2015) propose that affordances for abstractions emerge from parallelisms within resonating pairs *in situ*, or, more generally, sequences of related turns. This will naturally also help to explain language learning, processes that will also be strongly dependent on meta-linguistic practices and literacy training (cf. Taylor 2013). Languaging may therefore allow for, if not necessitate, a considerable amount of abstraction.

With regard to the form vs. substance dichotomy, we have gradually tried to substantiate the point that the most characteristically structuralist theories (Section 2.2) must be abandoned. Language cannot be exhaustively defined as abstract structures (“pure form”), and it is not a fruitful point-of-departure to regard form as immaterial and substance as material. Nor can form and substance be seen as abstract units and their realisations, respectively. Form and substance, in the domain of grammar, are to be seen as intertwined aspects of utterances. Structures and behaviours are not related as types and tokens. Rather, utterances have both structural and behavioural sides.

While structure and matter are still important aspects, we are inclined to supplement this with the Humboldtian (and ultimately Aristotelian) aspects of *potentialities* and *actualities*. Actualities consist of situated utterance actions, whereas the second-order language system, with its constraints and affordances, is potentiality, i.e., the substance out of which utterances get their shapes. In addition, we have the somewhat unspecified notion of *dynamis* (see above, Section 2.3).<sup>24</sup>

Structures of utterances are created and recreated through participants’ situated work with the materials of linguistic resources and bodily actions in ways that can involve online changes and retroconstructions. Acknowledging these facts and conclusions will help us specify the dynamics of language and languaging, and so put language, and linguistics, back on its feet.

<sup>23</sup>Other relevant models of utterance grammar include online syntax (Auer 2009a, 2009b), dynamic syntax (Kempson, Meyer-Viol, and Gabbay 2001), dialogical grammar (Günthner, Imo, and Bückler 2014), and Construction Grammar (Fried and Östman 2005). In addition, we are influenced by work in usage-based, functional and/or cognitive linguistics (e.g., Langacker 1987; Lambrecht 1994; Fauconnier and Turner 2002; Croft and Cruse 2004; Bybee 2010) and interactional linguistics (e.g., Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 1996; Ochs, Schegloff, and Thompson 1996; Szczepek Reed and Raymond 2013).

<sup>24</sup>This respecification of form vs. substance would also correspond to emergence vs. sedimentation (along the lines of Günthner, Imo, and Bückler 2014). Emergent patterns of languaging sediment as constraints on symbolisation (Rączaszek-Leonardi 2011). Processes in languaging may even lead to self-organisation (autopoiesis) of structures and resources of language (e.g., in phonology; Anward and Lindblom 1999).

## Acknowledgements

This paper is a revised version of a paper read at the workshop on "Substance and Structure in Linguistics" at Copenhagen University on February 27–28, 2015. Despite a very serious illness Jan Anward contributed continuously to this article, although the substantial writing was done by Per Linell. On January 28, 2016, Jan passed away, very soon after the paper was accepted for publication. His death is a great loss for the field of language and interaction. The authors wish to thank Björn Lindblom for earlier and thought-provoking discussions of structuralism. Elisabet Engdahl gave us insightful comments on another version of the paper. We also gratefully acknowledge pertinent recommendations by Lars Heltoft and two anonymous reviewers.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

Per Linell's work was supported by a grant to LinCS from the Swedish Research Council [grant number 349-2006-146].

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