SUPPLEMENTARY READING: A NOTE ON AGNATION

Introduction

The term *agnate*, together with its derivative *agnation*, was introduced into linguistics by the American structuralist H.A. Gleason, Jr. (Gleason 1965). He took the term from anthropology, where it means something quite different to do with kinship patterns. Although the link is somewhat tenuous, and it is not easy to see why he chose this particular term, it has proved very useful in discussing a certain kind of relationship between grammatical structures that was not captured by any existing terms at the time he was writing. However, it was not taken up very enthusiastically by the linguistics community until Halliday and his colleagues adopted it later, since when it has appeared with increasing frequency in systemic functional literature.

I will deal mainly with Gleason’s fairly straightforward explanation of agnation, briefly show its connection with the linguistic thinking of some of his contemporaries and then say something about recent use of the term by Hallidayans, which seems to be more inclusive.

Gleason’s explanation

Gleason says:

Pairs of sentences with the same major vocabulary items, but with different structures (generally shown by differences in arrangement, in accompanying function words, or other structure markers) are agnate if the relation in structure is regular and systematic, that is, if it can be stated in terms of general rules. (Gleason 1965: 202.)

He immediately concedes that this definition is not sufficient to base a decision on as to whether any two structures are agnate or not, and he says that until the grammar of any given language is fully worked out, we must depend on ‘feel for the language’. He further states that ‘agnation is not a unique relation between pairs of sentences’ but applies to ‘large
numbers of sentences’. Thus the same kind of agnate relation is found among the following pairs (Gleason’s examples):

- He saw it – agnate with – It was seen by him.
- He heard it – agnate with – It was heard by him.
- He felt it – agnate with – It was felt by him.

The relation is, of course, reciprocal: each member of the pair is agnate with the other.

It is essential to distinguish between agnation and a different kind of relation between pairs of structures typified by the vertical direction on the examples above, for example:

- He saw it – not agnate with – He heard it.

Gleason calls this relation enation, a term which you need not worry about because it never caught on and we have not seen it used in later work. This other relation (enation) is the one that prevails in substitution tables or frames where different lexical, grammatical or phonological terms are substituted in a given pattern, e.g.

- He speaks Spanish.
- He understands Spanish.
- He understands Chinese.
- Mary understands Chinese.

No two of these items constitute an agnate pair; any two make an enate pair. Even though the term enate is largely forgotten, the distinction between this relation and agnation is crucial, which is why we have dwelt on it here.

**More examples**

So far in exemplifying agnation, we have given only examples of the active–passive relation, but there are many, many more. Some examples follow:

- I love Chinese food. – agnate with – What I love is Chinese food.
Chomsky is an anarchist. – agnate with – It is Chomsky who is an anarchist. – agnate with – Is Chomsky an anarchist? – agnate with – Is it Chomsky who is an anarchist?

... clever people ... – agnate with – ... people who are clever ...

But they love Jamie. – agnate with – But Jamie they love.

... the destruction of the city ... – agnate with – the city’s destruction – agnate with – Someone destroyed the city. – agnate with – The city was destroyed.

Agnates and transformations

At the time when Gleason was writing the work we quoted, the dominant model of linguistics was Chomsky’s transformational grammar (the key concept of which – transformation – was later dropped, more or less: see FAE Chapter 12). Chomsky did not use the word agnate, but the relation between what Gleason called agnate structures was explained as a transformation relation; e.g. the passive transformation related active structures to their passive counterparts; the clefting transformation linked structures such as I love you and It’s you that I love. To put it simply, the sentences were said to have the same deep structure but one had undergone a transformation which the other hadn’t. (Gleason 1965 discusses transformations, too.) Chomsky argued that part of our innate ‘linguistic competence’ as humans is the awareness of this kind of ‘sentence relatedness’.

But it is not necessary to believe that the capacity to understand such relations is innate to see that agnation offers useful insights into the way that language works, especially when we couple it with Halliday’s powerful notion of grammatical metaphor. Examples of such insights can be found in later editions of IFG or in Halliday and Matthiessen (1999/2006), which is a more difficult book with very different, more specialized, aims.

Agnation and grammatical metaphor

One reason why agnation figures so frequently in the argumentation of contemporary SFL is its relevance to grammatical metaphor. Agnation is the relation that prevails between a congruent and less congruent expression of the same ‘idea’ (to use somewhat dodgy parlance) though there is no requirement for the expressions to be precisely synonymous.
Halliday and Matthiessen include more than Gleason does in their perception of which structures are agnate. For example, they claim that:

Qualities of projection are agnate with processes in figures of sensing; for example *happy in the happy child* (or *the child is happy*) is agnate with *rejoice in the child rejoices*. (Halliday and Matthiessen (1999/2006: 209).

They go on to speak of ‘agnate pairs of the *like* and *please* type’ (p. 210). This refers to the parallel structures we describe in *FAE* Chapter 6, where the choice between verb counterparts correlates with the choice between Senser and Phenomenon as Subject. Examples are: *fear:* *frighten; like:* *please*. In these structures, *X fears Y* implies *Y frightens X*; where X is Senser and Y is Phenomenon. Halliday and Matthiessen also mention related ‘figures of sensing: afraid/scary, suspicious/suspect, bored/boring’ (1999/2006: 210). Presumably, these would be exemplified by such structures as:

*It makes me afraid:* *I find it scary.*

*He seems suspicious to her:* *She suspects him.*

*The repetition is boring:* *One gets bored with the repetition.*

Some of these seem to be stretching the notion of agnation beyond Gleason’s account. (Remember he said: ‘Pairs of sentences *with the same major vocabulary items*, but with different structures.’ Where does this leave *afraid/scary*?) You can decide for yourself whether or not this extended application is a good thing or just how far you want to stretch the notion. But you should be prepared for such applications of the term in further readings in SFL.

(NOTE: Interestingly, in the early 1970s, Chomskyan linguists split irrevocably over the question of whether sentences involving lexical items like *destruction* were transformationally related to sentences with items like *destroy*. Chomsky said they were not.)

Useful examples of agnates in grammatical metaphor that Gleason might not have included (but that we have no qualms about) are:
I believe that most people are pretty much the same. – agnate with – ... my belief that most people are pretty much the same.

He will probably win. – agnate with – It is probable that he will win.

Spain might qualify – agnate with – Spain will possibly qualify – agnate with – ... the possibility of Spain qualifying ... – agnate with – ... Spain's qualification possibility ...

References