JEFF DOLVEN

*A New English Grammar

INTRODUCTION

There is a proof in set theory showing that the set of natural numbers, though it is infinite, is nonetheless smaller than the infinite set of real numbers. You can count one-by-one as high as you like, you never need to stop, but between each rung of your number-ladder is another infinity of fractional differences. Might the same be said of sentences? It is a premise of transformational grammar that the number of correct sentences to be made by applying the existing rules to the available vocabulary is infinite. But if you understand each one of those correct sentences to have a limitless number of incorrect, ungrammatical counterparts—generated by a misplaced preposition, a confusion of tenses, a disagreement of number—surely that second set is larger. There are infinite ways to get it right, but even more ways to get it wrong.

The linguists' symbol for a faulty sentence (or clause or phrase or word-form) is an asterisk: *_He had had gone_. That asterisk is not used to call out a mistake in the wild, but to indicate an example that has, in its wrongness, in its breach of usage and of the rules that codify usage, something to teach us. _Study this_, says the asterisk, _but do not talk this way_. The choice of that stylized six-pointed star nonetheless suggests—if you allow it to signify beyond the linguists' formalisms—that there is more to the story. Asterisks qualify: a claim that comes with an asterisk may be taken back elsewhere. Or they complicate: there is an aside, or a second thought, waiting at the bottom of the page. The symbol also has a technical use in the field of conversational analysis, where it denotes an instance of what is called "conversational repair." Such repair is something speakers do all the time, and grammar accounts for only a subset of the possible

reasons; we might get a date wrong, or find a better word, or mispell, *misspell, something in a text message. The asterisk signifies that what comes next is a revision in real time, going back to a previous utterance to fix it.

What if we did not go back, but went forward? Not, that is, corrected the mistake, or flagged it for study, or for shame, but proceeded as though it were no mistake—as though it were meaningful, and implied rules that might be trusted in language at large? Or even, as though it were the revelation, or the birth, of a new language? That would be to treat the counterexample as a counterfactual, a small, subjunctive gesture toward a different world, different because a linguistic glitch here is idiomatic there. The asterisk invites a step forward into that world. It is the first star of that new sky. From that new vantage, the vantage of a new English grammar, what could we see about the world we used to live in? What would have to change, about our beliefs, our customs, our politics, for the new sentence to be correct? Why ever was it not? Perfectly correct sentences have the power to make new worlds, even infinite new worlds, and perhaps, in a small way, every correct sentence does just that. But there are more infinities open to us.

*TENSE

Traditional grammar usually presents English as having a future tense, namely the form using the auxiliary verb *will*. There are two directions in which one could object to this analysis. First, the auxiliary *will* has a number of other uses. Second, there are many instances of future time reference where it is not necessary to use the auxiliary *will*, but where rather the so-called present tense suffices. In some subordinate clauses, the auxiliary *will* with reference to future time is excluded, even if it would be required in a main clause. So, in a main clause:

1a.   *It will rain tomorrow.*
1b.   * *It rains tomorrow.*

But in a subordinate clause, depending on the main:

2a.   *If it rains tomorrow, we will get wet.*
2b.   * *If it will rain tomorrow, we will get wet.*

On the other hand, in conditional (or *if*) clauses that do not refer to a specific time, *will* with a modal meaning (expressing necessity or probability) is permitted, e.g., *if he will go swimming in dangerous waters, he will drown*. Thus it is clear that in such subordinate clauses, future time reference uses of *will*, which are excluded, are grammatically distinct from modal uses of *will*, which are allowed. These examples therefore suggest (but do not, of course, prove) that English does have a future tense, and hence a structural capacity to distinguish between what will happen, what might happen, and what we want to happen, even if speakers themselves cannot.

If it will rain tomorrow, then
today it will rain, without a doubt,
which does not prove the contrary

though we can always pray it will:
will rain tomorrow, that's to say,
as sure as anything under the sun

it will, and in the meantime we'll
keep tossing the basin into the air.
Someone will will the water to rain.