A Critical Study of "Three Ranks"
of Otto Jespersen:
with Special Reference to
The Philosophy of Grammar

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The notions of "three ranks," "nexus," and "junction" are generally considered to constitute the essential part of the linguistic philosophy of Otto Jespersen and have been highly appreciated. Jespersen himself attached much importance to these ideas, and insisted on them repeatedly in his writings. Though insightful and suggestive, the ideas are not impeccable. Knowing the defects, the linguist modified them little by little for about 35 years to improve them. The objective of this paper is to discuss the contradiction in the theory of "three ranks" with special reference to The Philosophy of Grammar, and accordingly I disregard the amendment and modification found in his later writings.

The idea of "three ranks" is first presented systematically in Volume 2 of his A Modern English Grammar. In this book the distinction between "nexus" and "junction" has not yet been made clear, nor termed as such. In The Philosophy of Grammar published ten years later, the idea is modified in several aspects. For one thing the distinction between the notion of "parts of speech" and that of "ranks" is now stated expressively at the outset of the chapter on "three ranks":
The question of the class into which a word should be put—whether that of substantive or adjectives, or some other—is one that concerns the word in itself. Some answer to that question will therefore be found in dictionaries. We have now to consider combinations of words, and here we shall find that though a substantive always remains a substantive and an adjective an adjective, there is a certain scheme of subordination in connected speech which is analogous to the distribution of words into "parts of speech," without being entirely dependent on it.

In any composite denomination of a thing or person . . . we always find that there is one word of supreme importance to which the others are joined as subordinates. This chief word is defined (qualified, modified) by another word, which in its turn may be defined (qualified, modified) by a third word, etc. We are thus led to establish different "ranks" or words according to their mutual relations as defined or defining. (96)

For another thing he has established the categorical distinction between "form," "function," and "notion" in an earlier chapter of the book. Accordingly he no longer says that the theoretical basis for the classification of "ranks" is a "purely logical" one, for "three ranks" would be a functional classification while such a wording as "purely logical" hints a notional one. As another slight revision, the term "principal" used in A Modern English Grammar II is changed to "primary," without substantial modification.

Furthermore Jespersen has first established the notion of "nexus" and "junction," classifying the combination of words into one or the other. He insists that the notion of "three ranks" is applicable not only to the combinations of junction but to those of nexus as well. With these modifications, the idea of "three ranks" leaves various problems unsolved. Besides, the idea of "junction" and "nexus" has posed another problem in his
theory.

The fundamental question is the theoretical basis for the distinction between "parts of speech" and "three ranks." Concerning the correspondence and discrepancy between the two, Jespersen notes as follows:

The "parts of speech" classification and the "rank" classification represent different angles from which the same word or form may be viewed, first as it is in itself, and then as it is in combination with other words. (107)

The same idea is found in the passage quoted earlier in the paper. But things are not so simple and clear-cut as the passages hint.

In general, the notion "parts of speech" is so completely ingrained in grammar that few people would question its validity. One must, however, realize that it is no more than a grammatical artifact that needs justifying. Jespersen reconsiders its nature and the basis of classification, but not to the extent that he should call into question the validity of the notion itself. He takes up a lot of pages, previous to the chapters on "three ranks," to elucidate the system of "parts of speech," but he does not prove to be very successful in the end.

First, he questions what the classification of "parts of speech" should be based on: "whether on form (and form changes) or on meaning or on function in the sentence, or on all of these combined" (58). To that question he answers as follows:

In my opinion everything should be kept in view, form, function, and meaning, but it should be particularly emphasized that form, which is the most obvious test, may lead to our recognizing some word-classes in one language which are not distinct classes in other languages, and that meaning, though very important, is
most difficult to deal with, and especially that it is not possible to base a classification on short and easily applicable definitions.

(60)

Thus he takes all the three criteria, giving priority to "form." He does not make "form" the only criterion, for he knows that "it is generally of little avail to look at one isolated form. Nor is there any flexional ending that is the exclusive property of any single part of speech" (61). At the same time, however, he knows the difficulty in determining the part of speech on the basis of the function or signification of a word per se. The difficulty forces him to this conclusion:

One final remark: we cannot make the complexity of qualities or specialization of signification a criterion by which to decide whether a certain word is a substantive or an adjective: that must be settled in each case by formal criteria varying from language to language. (81)

Knowing the deficiency of "form" as a determinant, he still holds to it. One may wonder why, but there is an easy answer. For he defines "part of speech" as a property inherent in a word per se. The truth is, however, one can never speak of the function or meaning of a word isolated from a sentence. If he tries to define the nature of parts of speech on a logical basis, the definition is inevitably reduced to a subjective, sensuous one:

Substantives are broadly distinguished as having a more special signification, and adjectives as having a more general signification, because the former connote the possession of a complexity of qualities, and the latter the possession of one single quality. (81)
Such concepts as "special" and "general" are inaccurate. How can a substantive "beauty" or "silence" be more "special" than an adjective "rainy" or "noisy"? Compare also "worth" with "worthy"; either appears as "general" as the other. In short this kind of definition is ineffective. Still worse is the following account on the nature of a verb:

We discover that the verb imparts to the combination a special character of finish and makes it a (more or less) complete piece of communication—a character which is wanting if we combine a noun or pronoun with an adjective or adverb. The verb is a life-giving element, which makes it particularly valuable in building up sentences: a sentence nearly always contains a verb, and only exceptionally do we find combinations without a verb which might be called complete sentences. (86)

"Life-giving" as a property sounds too literary for a linguistic description. Besides, though a verb is a theoretically indispensable element in building up a sentence, a substantive is also indispensable for that matter, except for an imperative sentence. Therefore this characterization proves to be inadequate, too. Thus Jespersen finds a great difficulty in determining the theoretical basis of classification of "parts of speech." That is because he tires to restrict the basis within a word itself. In fact, however, it is impossible to determine the "part of speech" of a word except in a larger combination of words. Take, for example, a word "works." It has no predetermined status as a "part of speech." Definition by the form says nothing; the endings may show either the verbal inflection for third-person singular present, or the substantival inflection for plural. The "part of speech," either substantive or verb, is never determined until the word stands in a certain grammatical relation with other words; for example, "he
works” or “the works of Pecasso.” At this point one may well wonder what is the fundamental distinction of “parts of speech” from “three ranks.”

The fact is that “parts of speech” and “ranks” share in part the basis of classification, and this overlap is at the root of the various problems in the theory of “three ranks.”

Let me show the difficulty in the distinction between “parts of speech” and “ranks” with examples. Jespersen once says that a word which functions as, say, a verb must be taken as a verb no matter what form it may bear:

But this is often overlooked by writers who will say that in the sentence “we tead at the vicarage” we have a case of a substantive used as a verb. The truth is that we have a real verb, just as real as dine or eat, though derived from the substantive tea—and derived without any distinctive ending in the infinitive. (62)

The quotation above may be puzzling. One may well still claim that “tead” is a substantive used as secondary (adnex.) If it is granted as a “real verb,” then why should “well” in “well-passengers” be considered not as an adjective but as an “adverb used as an adjunct” (101), and “cheap” in “I bought it cheap” as a “substantive used as a subjunct” but not as an adverb (99)?

These examples show that Jespersen has failed to settle the definite boundary between “parts of speech” and “ranks.” Although the lack of precision is constitutional and therefore inevitable for any attempt at adapting natural language to grammatical artifacts, he has neglected the inevitable defects of grammar and takes the existing notion of “parts of speech” for granted. This is at the bottom of the problems of “ranks” to be dis-
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cussed below.

Now I will proceed to examine in more detail the problems found in the account on “three ranks” in The Philosophy of Grammar. The first argument is analogous to the problem mentioned above; I wonder what is the ground for the claim to take “adverbs as primaries.” He says that “long” in “he did not stay for long,” “abroad” in “he’s only just back from abroad,” and “there” in “he left there” are all adverbs functioning as primaries, on the ground that each of them is the object of either a preposition or a verb. In the first place, however, why is the object of either a preposition or a verb to be called “primary”? A primary it is only when primaries are rightly equated with substantives, and yet such an equation is not always to be allowed. Besides, provided that these words function as primaries analogous to substantives, then why should they maintain the label adverb? What is the ground for claiming that “long,” “abroad,” and “there” in the examples above are all adverbs? This kind of claim shows how Jespersen confuses the notion of “parts of speech” with that of “ranks.”

Another problem is that the three ranks are not sufficient to represent the functional differences within adjuncts. Consider the following phrases: (1) new electric guitar, and (2) tall fat man. In both examples each of the items would be analyzed as II, II, I, in order. That is, the two phrases would be analyzed as parallel in terms of the internal functional structure. However, they are not parallel. In the former the two adjuncts “new” and “electric” do not stand in the same relation to the primary “guitar,” but “electric” is more closely related to “guitar” than the other. And the order of the adjuncts is not reversible, nor can “and” be inserted between them. In the latter, on the other hand, the two adjuncts are of nearly the same relation to the primary, and the insertion of “and” is possible. These differ-
ences are, however, neglected within the theory of “three ranks.” The failure of the distinction is, in a sense, the reflection of the notion of “parts of speech,” and classifying all the items in question—“new,” “electric,” “tall,” “fat”—indiscriminately as adjectives.

Another problem is concerned with the distinction between “nexus” and “junction” in terms of “three ranks.” According to Jespersen such a combination as “a furiously barking dog” is termed “junction,” and “the dog barks furiously,” “nexus.” However, the distinction is not always plain. See the following quotation:

The relation between the last two words in he painted the door red is evidently parallel to that in the door is red and is different from that in the red door, and the two ideas “the Doctor” and “arrive” are connected essentially the same way in the four combinations (1) the Doctor arrived, (2) I saw that the Doctor arrived, (3) I saw the Doctor arrive, (4) I saw the Doctor’s arrival. What is common to these, and to some more combinations to be considered in the next chapter, is what I term a nexus. (115)

The combination in question is “the Doctor’s arrival” in the fourth sentence. The passage above says that “the Doctor” is primary and “arrival” is secondary and that their combination constitutes a nexus relation. Admitting that “the Doctor’s arrival” is different from “the arriving Doctor,” which is evidently a junction combination, I still doubt this is in fact a nexus combination. The Doctor is undoubtedly the one who arrives, and in that sense, there is a subject-predicate relation recognizable in the combination. Yet the same can be said for a junction combination, and “the Doctor’s arrival” is certainly different from “the Doctor arrives.” Further the relation of “the Doctor” and “arrive” is different from that in such com-
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Considerations as follows: “It is necessary for the Doctor to arrive in time,” or “The fine weather helped the Doctor’s arriving in time.”

Consider also such combinations as “Mary’s dance,” “Tom’s call,” “Jane’s promise,” “John’s speech,” “Mary’s letter,” and so on. If “Mary’s dance” is taken as a nexus combination, “Mary” would be assigned for the primary, and “dance” for the secondary. However, it is equally possible to claim that this is a junction combination and “Mary’s” is the secondary and “dance” the primary. The last case, “Mary’s letter,” would be the most problematic, for there is no verb to be derived from the substantive “letter” (at least in the sense of writing an epistle.) Nevertheless it is evidently Mary that writes the letter.

Take another instance, “Dr. Johnson’s study.” This combination is ambiguous in that Dr. Johnson may be either the one who studies or the subject to be studied. One may say that the combination is a nexus in the former sense, while a junction in the latter. By the analysis, “Dr. Johnson” would be the primary and “study” the secondary in the former, while “study” would be the primary and “Dr. Johnson’s” the secondary in the latter. This line of analysis is possible; however, it seems very inconsistent and ad hoc for the systematic theory of “three ranks.” It is also possible to analyze the combination as nexus in either interpretation. This is what Jespersen is most likely to do, for in a later paper he analyzes both “the Doctor’s arrival” and “the Doctor’s defeat” as nexus. He notes that the former is in an active sense and the latter is in a passive sense, distinguishing between the “subjective” and the “objective” genitive. However, it seems much more suitable to say that it is a junction combination in either sense; “Dr. Johnson’s” is the secondary (adjunct) and “study” the primary. For the same subject-object relation is observable in such a com-
bination as "Mary's picture," in which the genitive cannot be either "subjective" or "objective" in so far as the "picture" is not a "nexus-subjunct" or, in the traditional terminology, an "action noun." Nevertheless, Mary obviously can be either the painter or the model.

From the latter line of analysis one can infer that the genitive case has a property of marking the agent of a certain action implied in the nexus-substantive. Once this property is granted to the genitive case, "the Doctor's arrival" can easily be analyzed as a junction combination without a problem. Let me go further on this matter. The genitive case in general has the property of signifying "someone that is concerned." In some cases that is the agent of a certain action; in other cases, a proprietor, an object, or the like. Taking into consideration the property of the genitive case, one might well say that the nexus relation in "the Doctor's arrival" is identifiable with one of the properties and that it should not be analyzed independently.

The nature of substantives is worth serious consideration, too. Substantives have various implications, some of which can be expressed by the preceding substantive in the genitive case. For example, "town" may imply the existence of someone who constructed it, as seen in "Alexandria is Alexander's town," and also the existence of someone who lives in it, as in "Tom has never left his town." In the same way "picture" may imply the existence of the painter and the model, while "study" someone who studies and the subject to be studied. As for "arrival" there must be someone who arrives. Thus the so-called nexus relation in "the Doctor's arrival" is reducible to the properties of the genitive case and the substantive.

To fortify the argument, take such an expression as "I saw the arrival of the Doctor." It is very awkward to rank "arrival" as the secondary and "the
Doctor" the primary. Instead I propose to analyze the combination on the basis of the nature of substantives and that of the preposition "of."

I do not say that "the Doctor" and "arrival" in "I saw the Doctor’s arrival" do not stand in the agent-action relation. The point I should like to make is that the relation is only underlying or implied, and not to be stated expressively in grammar; i.e. as a nexus combination. Rather, I claim that this is a junction combination, so to speak.

Another problem arises with the "ranks" in nexus combinations. In such a sentence as "I like roses," the verb "like" is classed as secondary and both "I" and "roses" as primary. Why on earth should the object be equated with the subject in terms of function? The subject and the object of a sentence are equivalent only in the sense that both are substantives, that is, in terms of the parts of speech. It is no use, therefore, claiming that the object of a verb is a primary, for it amounts to noting but a paraphrase of the worn-out principle that the object of a verb is a noun (substantive.) The assignment of the rank primary to the object of a verb is a clear indication of Jespersen’s residual inclination to parts of speech in discussing the problems of ranks.

For another thing, I wonder what is the basis of ranking verbs as secondaries in nexus combinations. I see no reason why verbs should be classed "under" substantives, considering the importance of the information they bear in sentences. In "a barking dog," "barking" may well be ranked secondary to "a dog," for the phrase as a whole designates a kind of "dog." Yet in a nexus combination such as "a dog barks," if both of the two ideas, "a dog" and "bark," are referred to with an equal importance, as Jespersen says (116), then neither of them should be ranked under the other. In short, the idea of three ranks is not fit for nexus.
To sum up, the theory of “three ranks,” “nexus,” and “junction” contains various kinds of contradiction. The contradiction is the direct result of Jespersen’s failure in defining the nature of “parts of speech” and “three ranks,” and in demarcating them. They overlap to a degree in the basis of classification; besides, Jespersen did not get rid of the idea of “parts of speech” in discussing the ranks but relies on the presupposition of the former at times. It seems that Jespersen takes a “part of speech” as a property inherently determined to a certain word in itself; while a rank is to be attributed to a word according to its function in each of the actual combinations. The decision of “parts of speech” depends primarily on the form, while ranks on function; although all the aspects—form, function, and meaning—should be reckoned in both cases. The fundamental distinction between the two is that “parts of speech” are properties of a word in itself, whereas ranks are properties of mutual relation within a combination consisting of several words.

The pitfall is the belief in the notion “parts of speech.” One must remark that the notion “parts of speech” is no more than a grammatical artifact, and that any lexical item has no such inherent property in itself. The “part of speech” of a word can never be determined but in a larger combination. Jespersen, in a sense, is blinded by the commonness of the notion “parts of speech” and accepts it as a matter of course. And, what is worse, he depends on the notion unwittingly to cause the confusions of “parts of speech” and “ranks.”

The study of the contradiction in the theory of “three ranks” has compelled me to reconsider the validity of such a traditional notion as “parts of speech.” Likewise, if one hopes to scrutinize the nature of language, one must pay careful attention not to be trapped in the fallacy of the tradi-
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Notes

1. Otto Jespersen, *The Philosophy of Grammar* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, c1965). The first publication was in 1924. Subsequent quotations from *The Philosophy of Grammar* refer to this edition; hereafter, all page references of this publication will be given in parentheses after the quotation.


4. In Part II of *A Modern English Grammar*, the basis of the classification of ranks is stated as “purely logical.” In that book Jespersen seems to make only the dichotomous distinction either “grammatical” or “logical”; the latter would vaguely comprise “function” and “notion” termed as such in the new categorization. This point is discussed in Otto Funke’s critical paper, “Jespersens Lehre von den ‘Three Ranks,’” *Englische Studien*, 60. Band (1925), pp. 140–157.

5. Nine years after the publication of *The Philosophy of Grammar*, Jespersen still makes remarks on the same line. That is, he says that “the form taken by itself thus gives no clue to the class under which the word is to be included, but if we see how the word ‘behaves’ towards other words and how other words behave towards it in various circumstances, we obtain tests by which we can tell whether such a form is a substantive, an adjective, an adverb or a verb: fight is a substantive if it can take a or the before it, and if it adds s in the plural, but a verb if it is changed into fought when a fight in the past time is thought of, if it adds s in the third person, etc. In view of that, it is quite contradictory for him to say that “in ‘the French are a great nation’ the French is an adjective primary, in ‘the Americans are a great nation’ the Americans is a substantive primary.” Cf. Otto Jespersen, *The System of Grammar* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1933), pp. 450–458.

6. The infinitives and the gerunds are admittedly more akin to verbs, and in that sense the combinations might well be paralleled with the nexus combination of “the Doctor arrives.” Compare also Chomsky’s argument for the abolishment of the nominalization transformations. There he urges doing away

7. Jespersen sees the nexus relation underlying certain substantives and terms "nexus-substantives." He further subdivides into verbal nexus-words, analogous to the traditional "action nouns" such as "arrival" and "jump" on the one hand, and predicative nexus-words such as "cleverness" on the other. These notions represent his valuable insight in an attempt to elucidate the nature of substantives, but they contain various problems as discussed here.

8. Or it can mean even "Dr. Johnson's office," which interpretation is not relevant to my concern and is not discussed here.


10. In this case it is much more difficult to analyze "his" in "his town" as either a subjective or an objective genitive.

11. This argument is in the line of "the valence approach." "Valence" can be defined as an interrelation of words to combine with one another to constitute a phrase. For example the genitive case has a valence relation with the following substantive, which is to specify what is possessed by the referent of the genitive, etc.

12. Jespersen does the very thing; he says that an *of phrase* can substitute for the genitive in either the subjective sense, ignoring the inadequacy of classifying "the arrival" as secondary (adnex).

13. The same kind of problem is found in his claim about "adverbs as primaries" I mentioned earlier in the paper (see p. 62). He ranks the object of a preposition as primary, whatever form it may bear. The ground of this claim is clearly that the object of a preposition is generally a substantive.