Understanding Telex Messages
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Like invoices and operating manuals, telexes are written in condensed form. But telexes present particular problems for the reader, in that *content* is unpredictable. This paper examines the problems of writing grammatical rules for such texts, and goes on to make some suggestions as to how to teach comprehension of telex messages.

INTRODUCTION

Everybody who is involved in business has to learn the art of decoding texts which convey information in a highly condensed form. Invoices, operating manuals and telexes are just a few examples of this type of text which people in industry, trade or commerce can hardly hope to avoid handling. Whilst it might be thought that the most abbreviated forms would provide the greatest difficulty of comprehension, it would in fact appear that the opposite is the case. A brief examination of the three examples cited above may help to explain this.

An invoice can and usually does contain a great deal of information presented in a highly abridged form. Apart from the total price and a description of the goods, it may also give the unit price, terms of business, tax information, shipping arrangements and so on. Yet the conventionality of the format makes comprehension easy, and thus the brevity of expression in no way hinders decoding.

Operating manuals for machinery or equipment are not necessarily written in abbreviated form, yet it is the very absence of a convention which makes for difficulty, since it leads to a lack of consistency. To quote from an authentic example, an instruction on one page reads:

Check that the hinged wheel is correctly positioned and secure it by its pin.

while another on the very next page is worded:

Check cover disengaged and lock.

Obviously, such apparently random deletion of determiners, auxiliaries and so on is likely to present problems to the non-native reader. However, there is a standardisation of function if not of form in manuals: their aim is to instruct, and the range of realisations of the function is strictly limited. The reader will therefore assume that the vast majority of what he reads will be orders or prohibitions, and his interpretation of the text will be aided by a foreknowledge of the type of message which it is likely to contain.

Telexes are inconsistent in two ways. First, whilst some are written almost as if they were letters, others are highly condensed. The degree of mutilation will depend on numerous factors such as the length of the message, the stylistic preferences of the writer, the volume of business handled by the machine and the policy of the company.

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The second inconsistency relates to the lack of convention. Some contractions such as ATTN are apparently universally used, but in other instances there is a singular lack of uniformity. Even such a regularly occurring word as *THANKS* may be represented *TKS* or *THKS;* and whilst *YOU* is often rendered *U, YOUR* appears both as *YR* and *UR*. Given the enormously important role which telexes now play in international correspondence, it is perhaps surprising that greater standardisation has not come about.

VARIETY OF FORM IN TELEX MESSAGES

However, even such contractions as *REYRTLXNO1294* do not appear to unduly worry the experienced non-native reader. It is rather in the interpretation of the abbreviated instructional or informative *message* that misunderstandings are likely to occur. Although telexes will generally perform one or both of two broad functions (instruct and/or inform), they lack the predictability of content of the earlier examples, and the reader cannot therefore always rely on prediction as an aid to comprehension. Moreover, the range of realisations of the two functions is extremely varied. To illustrate the point, I list below some of the forms which are likely to be found in telex messages, both to show the potential for confusion implicit in such a range of construction, and also to highlight the difficulty of devising useful and teachable rules regarding interpretation.For the sake of clarity, I have made major divisions on the basis of the transitivity of the verb, and subdivisions according to the function of the message.

1.   **Intransitive verbs**

Inform-type message

Arrived London.
Arrived London Monday.
Have arrived London.
Will arrive London Monday.
?Arrive London Monday.
Must/Can/Essential etc arrive London Monday.

Goods arrived London.
Goods arrived London Monday.
Goods have arrived London.
Goods arriving London Monday.
Goods will arrive London Monday.
Goods to arrive London Monday.
Goods arrive London Monday.

Instruct-type messages

Arrive London Monday.
Goods to arrive London Monday.
Essential you/goods arrive London Monday.
You/Goods must arrive London Monday.

2.   Monotransitive verbs

Inform-type messages

Have had Brown met at airport.
Have met Brown at airport.
Meeting Brown at airport.
Will meet Brown at airport.
Having Brown met at airport.
Must/Can/Essential etc meet Brown at airport.

White met Brown at airport.
White has met Brown at airport.
White meeting Brown at airport.
White will meet Brown at airport.
White to meet Brown at airport.
White having Brown met at airport.
Having White meet Brown at airport.
White can meet Brown at airport.

Brown met at airport.
Brown will be met at airport.
Brown to be met at airport.

Instruct-type messages.

Meet Brown at airport.
Have Brown met at airport.
White to meet Brown at airport.
Brown to be met at airport.
Have White meet Brown at airport.
Essential you/White meet Brown at airport.
You/White must meet Brown at airport.
Brown must be met at airport.

3.   Ditransitive verbs

As monotransitive verbs, but with the possibility of two forms in most instances:

e.g.   Sent Green package.
       Sent package to Green.

Despite its length, the list above is clearly not exhaustive, but it is sufficiently comprehensive to serve as a basis for analysis.

What is immediately apparent is the extreme difficulty of devising syntactic rules for the reconstruction of the unabbreviated message. One of the problems is that, where regular verbs are concerned, active sentences using intransitive verbs may take the same abbreviated form as passive sentences:

GOODS DESPATCHED MONDAY.
GOODS ARRIVED MONDAY.

It is interesting to try out some simple transformations in the abbreviated style:

DESPATCHED GOODS MONDAY.
*ARRIVED GOODS MONDAY.

Similar problems can arise even in the case of two transitive verbs:

GOODS DESPATCHED MONDAY.
GOODS RECEIVED MONDAY.

Both of these are acceptable, but transformed to an instruct-type message, we find:

DESPATCH GOODS MONDAY.
?RECEIVE GOODS MONDAY.

As further evidence that similarity of form is an unreliable basis for rule-formation, we may propose some experimental syntactic rules of reconstruction and test them against actual examples. Let us try: *If the message (i.e. 'sentence') begins with a present participle, a first person subject may be assumed.* This rule certainly holds true for the examples in our list, but if we move from the level of the sentence to the level of the short text, it will be seen to be invalid:

ARRIVING LONDON FRIDAY. (= I am)
GOODS DESPATCHED MONDAY. ARRIVING
LONDON FRIDAY. (= They are)

If the rule is modified on the basis of this example to state that a first person subject may be assumed unless a preceding sentence has a second or third person subject, it can still be invalidated:

NEGOTIATIONS BROKEN DOWN. FLYING
BACK TOMORROW. (= I am)

Further modifications might eventually provide us with a valid rule, but it would probably be so complex as to be unusable.

An alternative approach would be to devise rules which try to relate form to function, but once again it is difficult to propose anything more than generalisations. Let us test: *If the sentence begins with the base form of the verb, the function of the message is to instruct.* Apart from the special problems posed by the verb *have,* as evidenced in the contrast between HAVE MET BROWN and HAVE BROWN MET, the only exception from the inform-type messages in the list is the questionable ?ARRIVE LONDON MONDAY. However, the second of the two examples below indicates that there is a group of lexical verbs which do not behave according to the rule:

ARRANGE MEETING FRIDAY, NOT THURSDAY AS STATED
EARLIER.
REGRET MEETING FRIDAY, NOT THURSDAY AS STATED
EARLIER.

Clearly, the reader needs to be able to make lexico-semantic as well as structural and functional distinctions, and the complexity of the task of interpretation is such that it is unlikely to be aided by the learning of simplistic rules of the type which have been exemplified.

TEACHING APPROACHES

Nevertheless, teachers cannot wash their hands of their responsibilities, and we must therefore seek some other way of helping our students to improve their understanding. Much has been written of the importance of "teaching" rather than "testing" comprehension. It is my opinion that there is no necessary conflict between the processes. Indeed, I would maintain that they are often one and the same thing, and that the teaching lies in the testing. The effectiveness of the teaching will therefore be directly proportional to the effectiveness of the testing. I offer below three examples (*not* models) of the type of exercise which might form a useful basis for class discussion, error analysis and consequent remedial work, and which might at the same time stimulate the students to formulate guidelines of their own for the decoding of abbreviated messages.

Exercise 1

Look at the ten brief telex messages below, and then try to answer the questions which follow:

ATTN: U. REED, NEW YORK.

A.	BROWN MET AT AIRPORT.
B.	BROWN TO BE MET AT AIRPORT.
C.	BROWN WILL BE MET AT AIRPORT.
D.	HAVE BROWN MET AT AIRPORT.
E.	HAVE MET BROWN AT AIRPORT.
F.	HAVING BROWN MET AT AIRPORT.
G.	MEET BROWN AT AIRPORT.
H.	MEETING BROWN AT AIRPORT.
I.	MET BROWN AT AIRPORT.
J.	WILL MEET BROWN AT AIRPORT.

REGARDS,
I. WRIGHT, LONDON

1. Which messages tell you that Brown is or was travelling to New York?

2. Which messages tell you that Brown has already arrived?

3. Which messages suggest that somebody other than Wright or Reed will meet or has met Brown?

4. In which messages does Wright instruct Reed to do something?

Exercise 2

If you were writing out the messages below in full, which would include the word *is* or *are*?

A. PAYMENT NEEDED IMMEDIATELY.
B. GOODS NEEDED OUR LONDON OFFICE.
C. EQUIPMENT NEEDED MAJOR REPAIRS.
D. CONFIRMATION NEEDED BY WEDNESDAY.
E. MACHINERY NEEDED COMPLETE MODIFICATION.

Look at the messages which require *is* or *are*. Which is the best description of their function?

1. To inform.   2. To inform and instruct.   3. To instruct.

What is the function of the messages which do not contain *is* or *are*?

Exercise 3

Mr Green received this telex from Mr White earlier today:

> MOST URGENT I RECEIVE YR REPORT TOMORROW, 5 P.M. LATEST.
> PLS ADVISE ME OF DELIVERY ARRANGEMENTS.

Mr Green immediately contacted a courier service and they guaranteed to deliver the report to Mr White before midday tomorrow. Which of these replies describes the arrangements most accurately?

A. WILL DELIVER REPORT BEFORE NOON TOMORROW.
B. DELIVERING REPORT BEFORE NOON TOMORROW.
C. WILL HAVE REPORT DELIVERED BEFORE NOON TOMORROW.

CONCLUSIONS

I have tried to suggest in this article that telexes pose great problems of comprehension, that because of their highly abbreviated nature it is difficult to devise rules of decoding, and that test-type exercises can be a useful method of concentrating students' attention on the meaning of the abridged message. I have offered only a brief and incomplete description of the problems, and still less regarding their solution, but given the huge daily traffic of telexes throughout the world, I hope that this short survey may prompt teachers to consider the issues raised here, to examine the difficulties involved, and perhaps to devise some useful strategies to improve students' understanding of this very important form of business correspondence.