1. This report is a record of issues in the semantics of natural languages that have concerned me in the past few years, some of the things I have had to say about them, and some of the things that others have had to say about them. There is nothing new in these pages, and there is much that is borrowed. I use numbered paragraphs mostly to create favorable associations - but also to make it obvious that I do not expect the reader to perceive here any structure beyond that of sheer sequence.

2. The traditional first task of sentence analysis has been that of understanding and recognizing the highest-level division in a sentence, that between its subject and its predicate. On the traditional account, the subject of a sentence is that portion of it which indicates 'the person or thing about whom or which a statement is made or a question asked', and its predicate is that portion of the sentence which contains 'the statement or the question asked'.

3. In formal grammars of the type first discussed by Chomsky, the subject/predicate distinction is captured in terms of labeled co-constituents of sentences. The two major co-constituents of a sentence are a nounphrase (NP) and a verbphrase (VP). A NP that is an immediate constituent of a sentence is defined as its subject; a VP that is an immediate constituent of a sentence is its predicate. We may refer to this as the configurational definition of subjects and predicates.

4. In theories of grammar that derive from the work of Chomsky, a distinction is made between the deep structure of a sentence and its surface structure. Since both the deep structure and the surface structure are capable of having major co-constituents of the same types, and since the entities so identified may be different in the deep and surface representations of the same sentence, it is necessary to speak of both deep structure and surface structure subjects and predicates.
5. It is of concern, therefore, whether the traditional account of the subject/predicate distinction applies to the distinction as it is defined for the surface structure or the deep structure level. Something akin to the traditional distinction is apparent in the surface structure of some sentences. On the interpretation that the passive transformation in English is meaning-preserving, it can be said that sentences (5-a) and (5-b) differ only in the identification of one or another NP as subject.

(5-a) Pianists play pianos.
(5-b) Pianos are played by pianists.

There are arguments for saying, however, that while (5-a) is 'analytic', (5-b) is 'synthetic'. Such claims might be made for the interpretation that (5-a) is a general statement about pianists and that (5-b) is a general statement about pianos.

6. It might be argued that either of the sentences in (5) can in fact be interpreted in either of the two mentioned ways. If that is so, then it follows that the traditional account of the semantic relevance of the subject/predicate distinction cannot be captured by the configurational definition at all, on either the deep or the surface structure level, unless grammatical description is a good deal more subtle and abstract than grammarians have thought.

7. The transformations which link deep structures with surface structures are taken, in the standard theory, to have in themselves no semantic import. It has therefore been assumed that the semantic relevance of the subject/predicate distinction should be sought only in the deep structure.

8. However, the semantic role of deep-structure subjects appears not to be univocal, at least when we look for the role of this entity in the most straightforward way. The involvement of the entity named by the subject NP in the event or situation described by the sentences given below appears to be quite different in each case.

(8-a) The boy slapped the girl.
(8-b) The boy fell down.
(8-c) The boy received a blow.