

would be no errors to redress. As it is, instead of finding containers exclusively suited for imperfect or perfect nominals, as the case may be, what we find, if I may say so, are tight ones and loose ones—contexts, that is, of strict or lax hospitality. What I mean is this. We have loose containers that are able to receive the untidy package of imperfect nominals, but are at the same time tolerant enough to hold neat packages of perfect nominals as well, provided they are not too tightly packed. On the other hand we have narrow containers that are exclusively suited to perfect nominals. This result, in itself, would be significant enough. Yet this is not all. We shall see that when perfect nominals are offered in a loose container, the native speaker is ready to accept the corresponding imperfect nominal as a true paraphrase. To mention an example in advance, the sentence

The collapse of the Germans is unlikely

contains a perfect nominal in a loose context. The appropriate imperfect nominal in the same context

That the Germans will collapse is unlikely

is accepted as a genuine paraphrase of the same sentence. If, on the contrary, the same sequence is offered in a narrow container, as in

The collapse of the Germans was gradual

there is not even a possibility of paraphrasing it into

\*That the Germans collapsed was gradual.

This fact leads to the important conclusion that in spite of their superficial tolerance, container sentences do discriminate quite sharply among nominals, and, in fact, may be more informative than the grammatical shape of the nom-

inal itself. It is an interesting question, of course, what the reason is for the tolerance of loose contexts. I guess, but can only guess, that it is the greater versatility of perfect nominals; they are more fit to enter containers, since the process of nominalization is not arrested here. Yet one cannot overdo things. If the nominal is too tightly bundled, the loose container tends to reject it or, at least, there are some rumbling noises. For example, while

The singing of the Marseillaise is unlikely

may pass,

The beautiful singing of the Marseillaise is unlikely

is at least questionable and

John's beautiful singing of the Marseillaise is unlikely

sounds horrible. Why is this so? The answer seems to be that since perfect nominals shed tenses and auxiliaries, too much of the relevant information is lost in the packaging process. Indeed, the last sentence can be reduced to a number of alternatives. For example,

It is unlikely that John sang . . .  
will sing . . .  
can sing . . .

What we see here is an interesting conflict between two tendencies: preservation of information content and simplification of form. There are good reasons to think that our language is somewhat unsettled, or even that it is undergoing a change, in this matter. This uncertainty, however, affects the surface rather than the substance.