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A Course in Applied Linguistics
M.A. in English Language and Linguistics
(Grammar)

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1. Introduction: grammar and grammars

Grammar is a complex concept that can mean different things to different people. It can be viewed as a list of rules, such as avoiding prepositions or labeling sentence fragments as incorrect. Prescriptive grammars distinguish between correct and incorrect forms, defining how we should speak. They often make overt value judgments by referring to standard varieties as correct or "good" English and nonstandard varieties as incorrect or "bad."

Descriptive grammars describe language as it is used, using rules as a plan for building well-formed structures. These rules represent speakers' unconscious knowledge or mental grammar of the language, focusing on describing how native speakers speak without prescribing how they should. Value-neutral terms 'grammatical' and 'ungrammatical' are used to distinguish between well-formed patterns and those that are not. Grammar consists of rules of syntax and morphology, which provide a more detailed look at language.

Applied linguists focus on 'pedagogical grammar', a type of grammar designed for second-language students and teachers. This type of grammar covers a wider range of structures than prescriptive ones and is more eclectic than some linguistic grammars. It draws insights from formal and functional grammars, as well as work on corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics. Pedagogical grammars aim to ensure students can produce formally accurate grammatical structures and use them meaningfully and appropriately.

2. Which rules to describe?

Grammars typically state rules in terms of general statements, describing how structures behave in a predictable, rule-governed way. However, some rules apply more consistently than others. For example, the ordering rule for auxiliaries is invariant, while the subject-verb agreement rule admits exceptions. Plural titles of books, plays, and films can also be exceptions to the subject-verb agreement rule.

Grammars intended for students of writing typically include only those forms acceptable in formal writing. Pedagogical grammars may focus on standard formal patterns but also include a number of informal alternatives, explaining the situations in which each is acceptable. For example, class assignments and job interviews typically require formal writing or speaking, while casual conversation tends towards informal expressions.

The decisions on grammar can be influenced by the intended audience and the view of grammar. This includes formal vs. functional approaches, type vs. token, sentence vs. discourse grammar, and the role of spoken vs. written forms. Many educators do not consider conformity to native speakers' grammar as necessary. These choices have implications for the design of pedagogical grammars, syllabuses, and teaching approaches.

3. Form and function

Formal grammar, epitomized by traditional grammar and Chomsky's generative theory, emphasizes the forms and rules within a language system. Generative grammar posits language as a mental grammar with abstract rules generating grammatical sentences, termed 'competence'. However, this approach focuses on rule-governed behavior and structure, overlooking language use in context. Contrastingly, Hymes' functional model prioritizes the appropriate use of language in discourse, highlighting 'communicative competence' encompassing both grammatical and pragmatic aspects. This perspective acknowledges language as meaningful communication within specific social contexts, including knowing how to structure questions and use language appropriately. In applied linguistics, the influence of these models is seen in syllabus design and teaching approaches. Structural syllabuses reflect formal grammar's emphasis on abstract forms, while notional syllabuses focus on functional aspects like speech acts. Teaching methods range from formal grammar instruction to communicative language teaching, with some advocating for a balanced approach integrating insights from both formal and functional perspectives.

3- Type versus token

Abstract descriptions describe various category types, while token descriptions reveal the frequency and co-occurrence of forms in different contexts. Type descriptions may provide a general overview of language, while token descriptions provide a detailed understanding of language usage in specific contexts. Token descriptions are a method of describing structures in language, which can reveal rare occurrences or restricted realizations through a limited range of lexical items. With the development of computers and computer analysis of language, token descriptions have become possible on a massive scale, revolutionizing the way we view language. The COBUILD Bank of English Corpus, containing over 500 million words, is an example of this. Sinclair (1985) believes that type descriptions lacking attested data do not provide an adequate source of reference for language teaching. Instead, he believes that language should be a projection of what actually occurs as recorded by computer analysis of text.

4. Spoken and written grammar

Corpus studies reveal significant differences between spoken and written grammar, raising questions about classification, distribution of features, and the status of spoken language within applied linguistics. These differences are particularly important for pedagogical grammars, as descriptions based on written modes or restricted genres may omit common features of everyday informal grammar and usage. For example, a survey of grammars showed examples of the reporting verb in the simple past tense, while in their spoken corpus, they found various examples of the verb in past continuous. Leech (2000) argues that these observations are valid, but more research is needed to fully understand the differences between spoken and written grammar. The same grammatical repertoires are present in both speech and writing, but structures may differ in frequency, and there is often a 'written bias' in linguistic descriptions

5. Learning grammar

Throughout history, various theories have been proposed to explain how grammar is learned. In the mid-20th century, grammar learning was believed to involve verbal habit formation, with teachers conducting pattern practice drills to help students overcome native language habits. The rise of generative grammar saw grammar learning as a process of rule formation, where students formulated, tested, and revised hypotheses about grammatical structures in the target language. However, the shift towards a more communicative approach has led to a change in views of grammar learning. Second language acquisition (SLA) research has informed modern perspectives on grammar learning, revealing that learners use intermediate forms before conforming to what is accurate in the target language. Connectionist or neural network models support this conclusion, but emergentism, which argues that learners' interlanguage emerges from repeated encounters with structures and opportunities to use them, makes language learning an iterative process. SLA research suggests that second language learners should give attention to grammar, but not through decontextualized drills or isolated exercises.

6. Teaching grammar

The current view suggests that students must notice what they are learning through various means, including implicit and interactive methods. Input enhancement, guided participation, and input-processing tasks can help increase the number of times students encounter the target structure in a text. Teachers should also provide overt productive practice, known as 'grammaring', which involves engaging in communicative tasks that require specific structures to complete.

For optimal transfer, this practice must be meaningful and meaningful, as it helps students develop the skills necessary for effective communication. Reading maps to give directions provides students with meaningful practice in using prepositions and imperatives. The nature of productive practice activities varies depending on the learning challenge, such as form or meaning.

Feedback is a necessary part of grammar instruction, with mechanisms ranging from direct correction by the teacher to recasts. Some applied linguists suggest encouraging students to make errors by being 'led down the garden path', but this approach may not be effective if learners do not notice and take corrective action.

A 'spiral syllabus' is recommended, where particular structures are recycled from time to time during a course. A compromise is to employ a grammar checklist, leaving the sequence indeterminate so that students can work on structures as they emerge naturally from classroom tasks and content.

In academic contexts, it is important for lessons for English language learners to have both content objectives and linguistic objectives, working with students on structures that do not normally arise in the course of everyday classroom discourse.