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Significance of Grammar - Phonology, Syntax and Semantics in Technical English

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Introduction

In spite of the fact that grammar is not so important as to communicate, communication can generally be achieved most efficiently by means of grammatical sentences. Especially in technical institutions, English is the only medium of instruction where ESP (English for special purposes) is followed revolving around the concept “Register”. Rajaji once said “Learn English through Science”.

Grammar - Phonology

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English is not a phonetic language whereas all Indian languages are phonetic. Besides, English is a stress-timed language whereas all Indian languages are syllable-timed languages. So, Indian students face difficulty in learning English especially when it comes to pronunciation.

Teaching of pronunciation presents peculiar difficulties. Grammatical structures can be taught in sequence. Pronunciation, on the other hand, does not permit such progressive treatment since all phonetic and phonological features are potentially present from the very first lesson. The teacher must deal systematically with the teaching of pronunciation according to grammar rules.

Received Pronunciation (RP)

Great prestige is still attached to this implicitly accepted social standard of RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION. RP is regarded as an evolving mode of pronunciation in phonological system.

Sound System

In English 26 letters represent 44 sounds in which vowel sounds are 20 and consonants sounds are 24. Vowel sounds are subdivided into monophthongs (12) and diphthongs (8). English language laboratory should be equipped with all sounds. The learner under the guidance of teacher listens and repeats the sound correctly. English as a second language is learnt with examples of listening and imitating. There are homophones, homographs and homonyms. The teacher selects the contrast words meticulously for practice.

For example:

art	ought
cart	court
hard	hoard
lard	lord
tart	taught
s	z

seal	zeal
hiss	his
loose	lose
ice	eyes
waltz	walls
course	cores

Accent

The stress-timed rhythm of English utterances with the weak syllables is the prime feature of the pronunciation. There are certain grammatical rules to follow which help us to add proper accent. The great variety of accentual patterns in English words must be given an important and early place in teaching pronunciation. For example:

1) Words ending in “ee” as suffix have stress on the ultimate syllable. Trai’nee, consig’nee, dra’wee, nomi’nee, pa’yee, etc.

2) Words ending in “ion” and “ic” have stress on penultimate syllable. Exami’nation, coope’ration, sen’sation scien’tific, pro’lific, dy’amic, etc. Here phonological grammar plays a vital role in mastering the accentual pattern.

Intonation

When we hear someone speaks, we realize that he doesn’t always speak on the same note. We hear constant variations in the level at which his voice is pitched. Learners with different linguistic backgrounds will experience different difficulties in appreciating the distinctive elements of English. So, the teacher should be aware of grammatical points of this area fully to pronounce correctly the sounds. In a sentence such “This is my book”, selection of nucleus depends on the aim of getting the answer according to the situation. So, according to grammar, the sentence may be falling, rising, rise-fall or fall-rise.

Assimilation

In connected speech or oration, some sounds are missing or some other sounds intrude. Assimilation takes place because of the attitude of the speaker. For example:

“hand+kerchief” becomes hanky.

The teacher must be thorough with the grammatical rules to use better English.

Elision

Since OE it has always been a feature of the structure of English words that the weakly accented syllables have undergone a process of loss of phonemes. But the examples of elided words are usually only in colloquial speech. Some of these will certainly occur in our speech. So the teacher must be careful to learn the grammar of phonology. It is good to have a theoretical and practical knowledge of changes; otherwise the teacher may not be able to understand and teach English pronunciation.

Grammar-Morphology

Morphology is the branch of linguistics that studies patterns of word formation within and across languages and attempts to formulate grammatical rules that model the knowledge of the users of the languages. Morphology is the identification, analysis and description of the structure of a given language’s morphemes and other linguistic units, such as root words, affixes, parts of speech, etc. While words are generally accepted as being the smallest units of syntax, it is clear that words can be related to other words by morphological rules (grammar). English users recognize that the words *boy* and *boys* are closely related – differentiated only by the plurality. Users of English recognize these relations because of their knowledge of the rules of word formation.

The distinction between these two senses of word is arguably the most important one in morphology. The first sense of the words “boy-boys” is same. The second sense is called word form. We thus say that *boy* and *boys* are different forms of the same root. Here we find two kinds of morphological grammar rules. Some morphological rules relate to different forms of the same root, while other rules relate to different roots. Rules of the first kind are called inflectional rules and rules of the second kind are called word formation.

Word formation is a process where one combines two complete words whereas with inflection we can combine a suffix with some verb to change its form to subject of the sentence. For example, in the present indefinite, we use walk with subject I/we/you/they and plural nouns, whereas for third person singular pronouns (he/she/it) and singular nouns, we use *walks* adding an inflectional marker "s" and which is used to match with its subject. A further difference is that in word formation, the resultant word may differ from its source word's grammatical category whereas in the process of inflection the word never changes its grammatical category.

In English there are word form pairs like ox/oxen, foot/feet, deer/deer, where the difference between the singular and plural is identified.

First way of word formation is inflection. In a word like recapitulation, we say that the morphemes are re-capitulate-ion. Here *capitulate* is the root and the first morpheme is the prefix and the other morpheme is the derivational suffix.

Example

From the root word "sign", word forms are made as furnished below:

sign	signable
signal	signaler
signalist	signalize
signate	signation
signatory	signature
signet	signify
significant	significance
insignificant	significantly
design	designation
designated	insignia

Second way of word formation is compounding. Compounding is a process of word formation that involves combining complete word forms into a single compound form.

Headmaster is therefore a compound word because both *head* and *master* are complete word forms before the compounding process has been applied.

Third way of word formation is derivation. Derivation involves affixing bound (no-independent) forms to existing roots, whereby the addition of the affix derives a new root. One example of derivation is clear in the example: The word “improvement” is derived from the word “prove” by prefixing it with “im” and by suffixing it with derivational suffix “ment”.

Languages may be classified as synthetic or analytic in their word formation, depending on the preferred way of expressing ideas that are inflectional: either by using word formation (synthetic), or by using syntactic phrases (analytic).

Grammar-Syntax

Grammar plays a vital role in using words in order. This we need to follow in using English language. The emphasis is on the form and technique, on the construction of sentences on the choice of words and on the use of the language. Syntactical concept the language mainly depends on the manner and matter. There may be and often obviously is the gap between spoken and written form. The syntax of the voice is not the syntax of the pen. Spoken form tends to be loose and could be vulgar while the written form becomes literary and formal. The syntactic grammar signifies the acceptable manner or way of writing.

We use grammatical structures created through movement of constituents and other changes for reasons relating to presenting information, including some structures that depart substantially from the basic structure “s+v+o”. Grammar is concerned with how sentences and utterances are formed. The arrangement of words (syntax) is an important item.

The meaning of the sentence “I gave my sister a ring for her birthday”, is obviously created by words such as *gave*, *sister*, *ring* and *birthday*. But there are also other words (*I*, *my*, *a*, *for*, *her*), which contribute to the meaning. Various aspects of the individual words and the way they are arranged enable us to interpret what the sentence means. For example, we know it is “I” who gave the sweater not my sister, because “I” comes before the verb “gave”. In English “I” comes before the verb “gave”. In English, subjects (the doers of the action) come before verbs in statements. We also know the relationship between the indirect object *my sister* and the direct

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object *a ring*. (The ring was given and my sister was the recipient) because indirect objects come before direct objects. We also expect “my” to come before sister, not after.

Structure = S+V+IO+DO

These aspects of the arrangement of words in sentences are referred to as SYNTAX. Syntax is one of the two basic principles of grammar. It is important to note that the learner is not expected to memorize these verb patterns. They are a simple reference system, a practical guide to the learner who wants to form correct grammatical sentences.

For example:

1. S+V+O = John likes tea.
2. S+V+C = Latha is a girl.
3. S+V+IO+DO = My father sent me money.
4. S+V+to infinitive = Someone has called to see you.
5. S+V+gerund = She enjoys playing tennis.
6. S+V+do+toinfinitive = He brought his wife to see me.

Focus structures are widely used in both conversation and writing. Teachers should understand the grammar of these structures and how they are used.

Form of cleft sentences = Cleft sentences are a variation of basic declarative sentences, differing from them in that constituents have been made prominent through changes that include splitting (clefting) the sentence.

Example (a) He brought a small red convertible.

(b) It was a small red convertible that he brought (cleft).

Form of Fronting

Fronting gives an element greater prominence by moving it to the beginning of a sentence as it involves only the movement of a constituent and not the addition of elements to a sentence. Fronting applies to a range of constituents and has several specific uses. It is relatively rare in speech but quite common in writing.

Examples

- (a) I don't understand him.
- (b) Him I don't understand (fronting).

Inversions

Inversion moves elements into a position of prominence at the beginning of a sentence. Depending on the inversion, the verb may be a main verb or an auxiliary. This process helps create an inversion structure from sentence with normal declarative s+v+o structure.

Examples

- If you had dropped the glass, it would have broken.
- Had you dropped the glass, it would have broken. (inversion)

As teachers we should understand the syntactical grammar how they are used for the benefit of the consumers of education.

Grammar-Semantics

English is a highly inflected language. It makes great use of inflection in its grammar of variations in the ending of the words. It prefers grammatical devices but there is enough at any rate to show what an inflexion is. English entered on a period of quite considerable change in form and meaning. The rich variety of English is one of the things that makes it an exciting language to speak and to use. We have some reason to feel optimistic about the continuing unity of English and about its prospects as a major medium of world use (for instruction and communication).

One of the striking things at the moment is the remarkable expansion and change going on in the vocabulary and meaning. It is clear that the process of change, which we have traced from the earliest records up to modern times, is still going on. English is changing today as it has always changed. So we need to learn the change in the use of particular forms of the

language. As users of English language, we inevitably feel that there is some unique correctness about our own particular form and we try to teach this form to our students. As users of language, we are fully entitled to accept it. It is natural to long for stability in a universe of change to try to pin things down and fix them.

Change in the language is found not only in the form but also in meaning. The semantic change lies between the language and the real world. Semantic value of the words depends purely on how the particular word is used in a particular context. For example, *Singapore is a FINE city*. Here the meaning is vivid and absolute. The reader has to have some knowledge of Singapore. So we have two aspects of meanings. One is referential meaning and the other formal meaning. There has been a tendency in us to confine our attention to formal meaning and to argue that referential meaning is not our concern.

Though there are no regular grammar rules here as we find in phonology and other areas, we can still see some kind of grammar rule in the changes of meaning.

A Few Examples

1. I saw a dark lady in a dark room.

Here the meaning of the first “dark” refers to skin colour.

2. The word “horn” is in different sentences with different meanings. The context alone gives definite meaning.

(1) The original meaning of horn is “one of a pair of pointed projections on the heads of oxen, sheep, goats etc.

(2) But it was extended to mean “one of those used as a musical instrument.

(3) In modern days it is used for “hollow drinking vessel”.

(4) For sound making apparatus as in cars, buses, etc. Sometimes the word *horn* is used figuratively. “Take the bull by the horns” means “to face a difficult thing or person rather than avoiding them”.

3. The word “pass” has meanings in different contexts.

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- (a) I passed X class last year.
- (b) When I was passing on the road, I met my friend.
- (c) I passed one hour in English lab.
- (d) Because of the large crowd in the street the bus was unable to pass.
- (e) The child passes urine on the bed.

The coexistence of several meanings in one word which is extremely common is called polysemy. The existence of polysemy has obvious dangers because a key word in our argument is used with different shades of meanings in different places. This often happens in political or moral disputes where words like *freedom* and *natural* get thrown in shifting senses.

Sometimes the change of meaning is caused by the form of a word. For example, the antonym of the word *qualified* is *unqualified* and *disqualified* with different meanings. The meanings of *disinterested* and *uninterested* are not same though the two words are antonyms of the word *interested*. Figurative use of words gives odd meanings: *Foot of the hill, mouth of river, bottleneck*.

As teachers of English, we should be thorough with the grammar of semantics and we should accept all innovations automatically and uncritically admitting the fact that changes of meanings exist and will continue.

Conclusion

Resourceful teachers of English should master the command of English especially in the area of grammar. He/she is the key person to translate knowledge into practice in the classroom. Though grammar does not exist separately from other levels of language, grammar is the important ingredient hidden in the language. There is a close link between grammar and lexis. Grammar plays a vital role in the technical field as Indian students study technical course in English medium. Considering the need to teach four areas – phonological, morphological, syntactical and semantic - of grammar which should be taught functionally, the teachers of English should play a pivotal role in the classroom so that the technical students will certainly learn English to become effective communicators in all their chosen careers.

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