Technical Usage of English Syntax

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1. Introduction

'Syntax' is a Greek word, which means order or arrangement. "Syntax is the study of the way in which phrases and sentences are structured out of words" (Andrew Radford, p.1)   It is the study that examines the relationship between words as component parts of a sentence sustaining their proper arrangement to exhibit the meaning intended. Every language is rich with its syntactic rules and linguists believe that those rules are descriptive in nature. They are the rules that underpin the life of the language and which are extremely slow to change. To enunciate this descriptive rule of an imperative syntax of technical English, a few exemplifications where the verbs precede the nouns, are taken for discussion.

Wear gloves before welding   - Wear / gloves / before welding.
                                                (V)   (N)
Note the measurement thrice - Note / the measurement / thrice.
                                                (V)   (N)
Connect the circuit properly   - Connect / the circuit / properly
                                                (V)   (N)
                                                (VI)

In the above stated examples, the main verb 'wear' precedes the noun 'gloves' in the first instruction. The verb 'note' precedes the noun 'measurement' in the second

example and the verb 'connect' precedes the noun 'circuit' in the third example. The precedence of an auxiliary verb before the noun contributes to the interrogative structure and the precedence of main verb before the noun accounts for the imperative structure in the English syntax. The imperative syntax is exhaustively used in technical English exclusively to give instructions.

2. Juxtaposing Syntax and Grammar

At this point, we may explore the distinction between grammar and syntax. In fact, grammar is a wholesome unit of a language and syntax is a component of it. The term 'grammar' refers to the whole structure of a language, whereas 'syntax' refers only to the relationship between the grammatical components in use. Grammar is the study of each minute field of a language like parts of speech, rules of tense, types of sentences, phrases and clauses and its sound system. The term 'grammar' is comprehensive by itself. But the province of syntax is only the nature, quality or type of relationship between the terms of a language. In other words, syntax is the study of grammatical arrangement of words thus by implying the structure of a sentence.

3. Components of Syntax

The study of syntax of English language shall be observed through its word order, subject + verb agreement (Concordance), and agreement within the verb structure of a sentence. Being the prime constituent of syntax, 'agreement' studies the arrangement and positioning of words in syntax. It exhibits the relationship in person, number, gender, case, mood, and tense. The arrangement of words in a sentence reveals the collocation or relative position of the secondary constituents of syntax namely, Word order and Subject + Verb agreement. Perhaps, this paper focuses on word order in technical English.

4. Word Order

"In linguistics, word order typology refers to the study of the different ways in which languages arrange the constituents of their sentences relative to each other, and the systematic correspondences between these arrangements. Some languages have relatively restrictive word orders, often relying on the order of constituents to convey important grammatical information." *(www.wikipedia.org)*

Word order is the vital factor in sustaining the concordance of a sentence. The uniqueness of English language in its inflectional strategy, of course, has made it essential to study word order in particular. Other than morphological inflections, English language hardly undergoes inflection. Perhaps, this could result in several vulnerable problems on the syntactic and semantic facet of the language, if word order failed to come for the refuge.

When a language is adaptive to inflections, the change either in the subject or the object can seldom cause a semantic havoc. Whereas, when the ambience is not conducive for such inflections in a language, the need for solving the conundrum of sustaining the syntactic harmony becomes essential. As the incredibility sustains for such inflections in English language, word order becomes a crucial factor in maintaining the structural harmony of the sentences. Especially in technical usage of English language, word order plays a pivotal role.
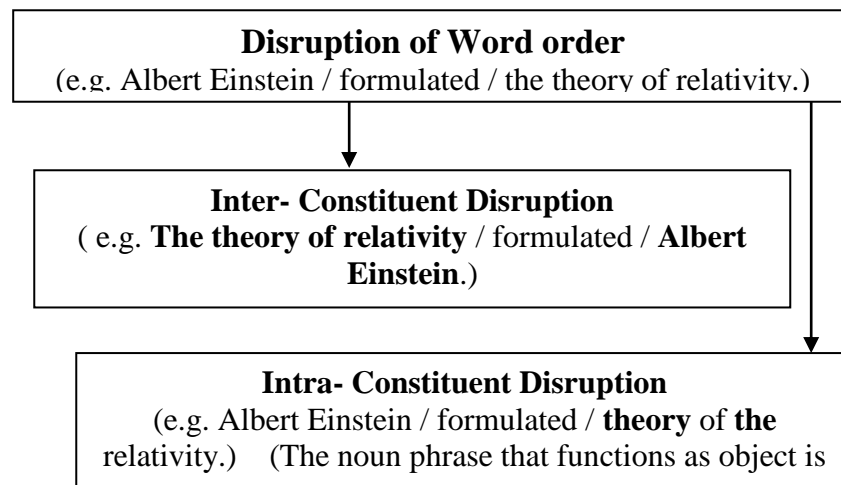
The fulcrum factor in the irregular usage of word order is due to the vernacular influence.

5. Change of Word Order

Word-order or relative position of the words in the string is by far the most important structural device in English (Baruah, T.C., p.93).

Perhaps, the incorrect positioning of word order results in corruptive syntax thus leading to grammatical and semantic fallacy. Factually, word order exhibits the relationship between its constituents like subject, verb, object, complement and Adjunct in a sentence. Hence, the disruption may occur in any part of its constituents. It may be either an Inter-constituent disruption or an Intra- constituent disruption. Fig.1.1 illustrates the classification of the disruption of the word order.

Fig. 1.1. Classification of disruption of word order

| **Disruption of Word order** |
| (e.g. Albert Einstein / formulated / the theory of relativity.) |

| **Inter- Constituent Disruption** |
| (e.g. **The theory of relativity** / formulated / **Albert Einstein**.) |

| **Intra- Constituent Disruption** |
| (e.g. Albert Einstein / formulated / **theory** of **the** relativity.)   (The noun phrase that functions as object is |

6. Inter-Constituent Disruption

Every sentence follows a pattern accustoming the noun phrase, verb phrase, adjectival phrase and adverbial phrase. The deviation of a sentence pattern occurring

due to the interchange of any of the constituents of a sentence like subject, verb, object, complement or adjunct of the same sentence is called inter-constituent disruption. The subsequent exemplification overtly exhibits the consequences of the inter-constituent disruption of word order.

> **Subject (NP) +Verb (VP) + Object (NP)**
> Barometer / measures / atmospheric pressure.

The 'subject' and the 'object' are generally Noun Phrases (NP). However, the interchange of 'subject' and the 'object' in active voice would result in erroneous and ungrammatical syntax by disrupting the semantic balance of a sentence as enunciated below.

> **1. Object (NP) +Verb (V) +Subject (NP)**
> Atmospheric pressure / measures / Barometer.

7. Inter-Constituent Disruption Due To Vernacular Influence

Generally, the trace of mother tongue influence is seen in the inter-constituent disruption of word order of a sentence. For instance, a native speaker of Tamil might get into the inter-constituent disruption of the subsequent categories very quickly as these structures are permissible in Tamil language.

> **2. Object (NP) +Verb (V) +Subject (NP)**
> Barometer /Atmospheric pressure / measures.
>
> **3. Object (NP) +Subject (NP) + Verb (V)**
> Atmospheric pressure / Barometer /measures.

The immediate presence of the 'object', 'atmospheric pressure' after the 'subject', 'barometer' besides, the precedence of the 'object, 'atmospheric pressure' before the 'subject', 'barometer' that precedes the 'verb', 'measures' in the above stated sentences lead to a total collapse of the syntax.

8. Intra-Constituent Disruption

The term 'intra-constituent disruption' denotes the disruption of syntax caused due to incorrect positioning of the words within the same constituent.

> **1. Subject (NP) +Verb (VP) + Object (NP)**
> Barometer/ measures / *atmospheric pressure*
> **Object (NP = Adjective + Noun)**

> **2. Subject (NP) +Verb (VP) + Object (NP)**
> Barometer/ measures / *pressure atmospheric*
> **Object (NP = Noun + Adjective)**

The syntactic relationship of English permits exclusively the adjectives to qualify the nouns and the case hardly goes vice versa. But in the example illustrated above the structure is inverted and the noun is preceded by the adjective. Even though the sentence patterns resume the same in both the examples enunciated above, the second example is infected by the interchange of adjective, 'atmospheric' and noun, 'pressure'. This interchange resulting in a syntactic havoc is perhaps witnessed within the same constituent called 'object'. The disruption of word order of this nature is termed as intra-constituent disruption.

9. Conclusion

The discordance of syntax either collapses the flow of technical discourse or makes it vulnerably ambiguous. This happens due to the factors discussed above. The vernacular influence paves the way for syntactic errors in technical usage. Hence, it becomes indispensable for a professor of English to keenly observe the nature of one's syntax errors before getting involved in the stereo-typed pattern of teaching the usage of English technically. The application of remedial measures to curtail syntactic errors of students in their technical usage of English will not yield desired results, if we do not identify their mistakes / irregular sentence constructions in advance.

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References

1. Andrew Radford, *English Syntax*, CUP, 2004, p.1

2. Baruah T. C. *The English Teacher's Handbook*. Sterling Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 2007. p.93.

3. www.wikipedia.org

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