

1 Grammatical form

1.1 Form, meaning, and use

Why do people talk? What is language for? One common answer to this question is that language is a complex form of communication, and that people talk in order to share or request information. That is certainly a very important use of language, but clearly it is not the only use.

For example, what is the meaning of the word *hello*? What information does it convey? It is a very difficult word to define, but every speaker of English knows how to use it: for greeting an acquaintance, answering the telephone, etc. We might say that *hello* conveys the information that the speaker wishes to acknowledge the presence of, or initiate a conversation with, the hearer. But it would be very strange to answer the phone or greet your best friend by saying “I wish to acknowledge your presence” or “I wish to initiate a conversation with you.” What is important about the word *hello* is not its information content (if any) but its use in social interaction.

In the Teochew language (a “dialect” of Chinese), there is no word for ‘hello’. The normal way for one friend to greet another is to ask: “Have you already eaten or not?” The expected reply is: “I have eaten,” even if this is not in fact true.

Now no one would want to say that *hello* means “Have you eaten yet?” But, in certain contexts, the English word and the Teochew question may be used for the same purpose or function, i.e. as a greeting. This example illustrates why it is helpful to distinguish between the meaning (or SEMANTIC content) of an utterance and its function (or PRAGMATIC content).

Of course, in many contexts there is a close relationship between meaning and function. For example, if a doctor wants to administer a certain medicine which cannot be taken on an empty stomach, he will probably ask the patient: “Have you eaten?” In this situation both the meaning and the function of the question will be essentially the same whether the doctor is speaking English or Teochew. The FORM, however, would be quite different. Compare the Teochew form in (1a) with its English translation in (1b):

- (1) a Li chya? pa boy?
you eat full not.yet
b *Have you already eaten?*

Obviously the words themselves are different, but there are grammatical differences as well. Both sentences have the form of a question. In Teochew this is indicated by the presence of a negative element ('not yet') at the end of the sentence, while in English it is indicated by the special position of the auxiliary verb *have* at the beginning of the sentence.

This book is primarily concerned with describing linguistic FORM, and in particular with describing grammatical structure. (What we mean by "grammatical structure" will be discussed below.) But in our study of these structural features, we will often want to talk about the meaning of a particular form and/or how it is used. The Teochew example illustrates how a particular form may be used for different functions, depending on the context. This means that the form of an utterance by itself (ignoring context) does not determine its function. But it is equally true that function by itself does not fully determine the form. In other words, we cannot fully explain the form of an utterance while ignoring meaning and function; at the same time, we cannot account for the form of an utterance by looking *only* at its meaning and function.

1.2 Aspects of linguistic form

In describing the grammar of a language, we are essentially trying to explain why speakers recognize certain forms as being "correct" but reject others as being "incorrect." Notice that we are speaking of the acceptability of the form itself, rather than the meaning or function which it expresses. We can often understand a sentence perfectly well even if it is not grammatically correct, as illustrated in (2).

- (2) a Me Tarzan, you Jane.
 b Those guys was trying to kill me.
 c When he came here?

Conversely, the form of a sentence may be accepted as correct even when the meaning is obscure or absurd. An extreme example of this is found in Lewis Carroll's famous poem *Jabberwocky*, from the book *Through the Looking Glass*. The poem begins as follows:

Jabberwocky

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
 Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
 And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
 The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
 The frumious Bandersnatch!"

(Another five verses follow in a similar style.) After reading this poem, a native speaker of English will very likely feel as Alice did (pp. 134–136):

“It seems very pretty,” she said when she had finished it, “but it’s *rather* hard to understand!” (You see she didn’t like to confess even to herself, that she couldn’t make it out at all.) “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don’t exactly know what they are!”

In the second verse, we can at least guess that the Jabberwock is some kind of beast, the Jubjub is a kind of bird, and the Bandersnatch is something dangerous and probably animate. But the first verse is almost total nonsense; the “function” words (i.e. conjunctions, articles, prepositions, etc.) are real English words, but almost all the content words (nouns, verbs, etc.) are meaningless.

As noted in section 1.1, language is normally used to communicate some MEANING from the speaker to the hearer. In these verses very little meaning is communicated, yet any speaker of English will recognize the poem as being English. How is this possible? Because the FORM of the poem is perfectly correct, and in fact (as Alice points out) quite pretty. Thus in one sense the poem is successful, even though it fails to communicate.

Let us look at some of the formal properties of the poem which make it recognizable, although not comprehensible, as English. First, of course, the whole poem “sounds” like English. All of the nonsense words are pronounced using sounds which are phonemes in English. These sounds are represented in written form using English spelling conventions. And these phonemes are arranged in permissible sequences, so that each nonsense word has the phonological shape of a possible word in English. For example, *brillig* and *gimble* could be English words; in a sense it is just an accident that they do not actually mean anything. In contrast, *bgillir* and *gmible* are not possible English words, because they violate the rules for combining sounds in English.

In addition, Carroll has skillfully made many of the nonsense words resemble real words which could occur in the same position: *brillig* reminds us of *brilliant* and *bright*; *slithy* reminds us of *slippery*, *slimy*, *slithering*, etc.

Second, the sentence patterns are recognizably those of English, specifically of a poetic and slightly old-fashioned style of English. We have noted that most of the function words (*the*, *and*, *in*, *were*, etc.) are real English words, and they occur in their proper place in the sentence. Similarly real content words like *son*, *shun*, *jaws*, *claws*, etc. are used in appropriate positions. We can generally identify the PART OF SPEECH (or CATEGORY) of each of the nonsense words by the position in which we find it. For example, *slithy*, *frumious*, and (probably) *mome* must be adjectives, while *gyre* and *gimble* (and probably *outgrabe*) are verbs. (In chapter 3,

section 3.4 we will discuss some of the specific clues which allow us to reach these conclusions.)

Besides the word order, there are other clues about word categories. For example, we can see that *toves*, *borogoves*, and *raths* are nouns, not only because they all follow the definite article *the* (and perhaps an adjective) but also because they all contain a final *-s* which is used in English to indicate PLURALITY (more than one). This marker can only be attached to nouns. Similarly, the final *-ous* in *frumious* is typically found only in adjectives, which reinforces our earlier conclusion that *frumious* must be an adjective. And in the following couplet (from a later verse):

“And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!”

the word *beamish* contains an ending *-ish* which is found in many adjectives; this confirms what we could already guess based on position.

Finally, the form of the poem as a whole conforms to a number of important conventions. The poem is divided into stanzas containing exactly four lines each. The first stanza, which seems to provide a kind of setting, is repeated verbatim at the end of the poem to create a frame around the story. The last word in each line, whether it means anything or not, fits into the A–B–A–B rhyme pattern typical of much English poetry. Each line has exactly four stressed syllables, with stressed and unstressed syllables alternating in a fixed rhythmic pattern. These features serve to identify this extended utterance as a coherent text, or DISCOURSE, of a certain type.

So there are at least four kinds of formal properties that Carroll manipulates to make his poem effective: sound patterns, word shapes, sentence patterns, and discourse structure. In this book we will be very much concerned with sentence patterns (SYNTAX) and word shapes (MORPHOLOGY), but only indirectly concerned with sound patterns (PHONOLOGY). And, due to limitations of space, we will not be able to deal with discourse structure here.

1.3 Grammar as a system of rules

One way to evaluate a person’s progress in learning a new language is to measure their vocabulary: how many words do they know? But it does not make sense to ask, “How many sentences does this person know?” Vocabulary items (words, idioms, etc.) are typically learned one at a time, but we do not “learn” sentences that way. Rather than memorizing a large inventory of sentences, speakers create sentences as needed. They are able to do this because they “know” the rules of the language. By using these rules, even a person who knew only a limited number of words could potentially produce an extremely large number of sentences.

Now when we say that a speaker of English (or Tamil, or Chinese) “knows” the rules for forming sentences in that language, we do not mean that the person is aware of this knowledge. We need to distinguish between two different kinds of rules. There are some rules about using language that must be consciously learned, the kind of rules we often learn in school. Rules of this kind are called **PRESCRIPTIVE** rules: rules which define a standard form of the language, and which some authority must explicitly state for the benefit of other speakers.

The rules we are interested in here are those which the native speaker is usually not aware of – the kind of knowledge about the language that children learn naturally and unconsciously from their parents and other members of their speech community, whether they attend school or not. All languages, whether standardized or not, have rules of this kind, and these rules constitute the grammar of the language. Our approach to the study of grammar will be **DESCRIPTIVE** rather than prescriptive: our primary goal will be to observe, describe, and analyze what speakers of a language actually say, rather than trying to tell them what they should or should not say.

We have seen that there are rules in English concerning the sequence of sounds within a word. Similarly there are rules for the arrangement of words within a sentence, the arrangement of “meaningful elements” within a word, etc. The term **GRAMMAR** is often used to refer to the complete set of rules needed to produce all the regular patterns in a given language. Another, perhaps older, way in which the term **GRAMMAR** is sometimes used means roughly “all the structural properties of the language except sound structure (phonology),” i.e. the structure of words, phrases, sentences, texts, etc. This book is concerned with grammar in both senses. It is intended to help prepare you to analyze and describe the word and sentence patterns of a language (sense 2) by formulating a set of rules (sense 1) which account for those patterns.

1.4 Conclusion

Even though there is a close relationship between linguistic form and meaning, there is also a certain amount of independence between them. Neither can be defined in terms of the other: speakers can produce both grammatical sentences which are meaningless, and meaningful sentences which are ungrammatical.

In our comparison of English with Teochew, we saw that both languages employ a special form of sentence for expressing Yes–No questions. In fact, most, if not all, languages have a special sentence pattern which is used for asking such questions. This shows that the linguistic form of an utterance is often closely related to its meaning and its function. On the other hand,

we noted that the grammatical features of a Yes–No question in English are not the same as in Teochew. Different languages may use very different grammatical devices to express the same basic concept. So understanding the meaning and function of an utterance will not tell us everything we need to know about its form.

Many aspects of linguistic form are arbitrary conventions shared by the speakers of a given language. For example, in English (and in most other European languages) the subject of a sentence normally occurs before the verb; but in most Philippine languages the subject normally occurs after the verb. This difference might be called arbitrary, in that it does not reflect a contrast in meaning or function. But this does not mean that the difference is random. Word-order facts within any given language tend to show interesting patterns of correlation, and the patterns observed in different languages tend to vary in limited and systematic ways.

One of our primary goals as linguists is to discover the patterns of regularity that exist in the grammatical systems of individual languages, as well as the recurring patterns common to many languages. This book introduces some basic concepts and techniques that can help you in these tasks. Our study of grammatical structure will frequently involve a discussion of meaning (semantic content), and to a lesser extent of function as well. However, it has not been possible within the limitations of this volume to address either semantics or pragmatics in any systematic way. It is hoped that readers of this book will go on to study other books where those issues are discussed in greater detail.