

Lecture 12

Generative grammar and Universal Grammar

In this class, we will cover the following points:

Generative grammar

Universal grammar

Evidence for universal grammar

Explaining linguistic variation

Generative grammar

- The underlying thesis of generative grammar is that sentences are generated by an subconscious (hidden/intuitive) set of procedures (like computer programs).
- These procedures are part of our minds (or of our cognitive abilities).
- Generative grammar models (represents) these procedures through a set of formal grammatical rules.
- These rules tell you the order in which to put your words (in English, for example, we put the subject of a sentence before its verb; this is the kind of information encoded in generative rules).
- These rules are thought to generate the sentences of a language, hence the name generative grammar.
- You can think of these rules as being like the command lines in a computer program. They tell you step by step how to put together words into a sentence.

Generative grammar and Universal Grammar

- Thus, generative grammar is concerned with the biological/ subconscious basis for the acquisition and use of human language, and the universal principles (laws) which constrain (make/control) the class of all languages.
- Probably the most controversial claim of Noam Chomsky's is that Language is also an instinct.
- That is, many parts of Language are built in, or **innate** (inherent/inborn). Much of Language is an ability hard-wired into our brains by our genes.
- Obviously, particular languages are not innate.
- That is, an Arabic speaker is not born with an innate faculty (ability) to speak Arabic in particular. Likewise, an English speaker is not born with an innate faculty to speak English in particular.
- For example, it is not the case that a child of Arab parents growing up in the UK, who is never spoken to in Arabic, grows up speaking Arabic.
- He will speak English (or whatever other language is spoken around him).
- So on the surface it seems crazy to claim that Language is an instinct.

Universal Grammar

- However, there are very good reasons to believe that a human facility/faculty for Language is innate. This facility is called **Universal Grammar** (or UG).
- That is, the grammars of all languages are constrained (controlled) by universal laws or principles.
- The child is born with an innate predisposition (tendency) to acquire languages which adhere to these universal principles.

Evidence for Universal Grammar

There is much evidence for universal grammar:

- 1- The fact in language acquisition that we know things about the grammar of our language that we possibly have not been taught before.

Ex. a- he went to the cinema yesterday

b- yesterday he went to the cinema

c- * *went he to yesterday the cinema*

- All of us know that the sentences in 'a' and 'b' are grammatical, whereas the sentence in 'c' (with he asterisk*) is ungrammatical although nobody have taught us this.
- 2- parents do not correct the grammar of their children all the time; even in the cases in which parents try to do this, they fail as the child carries on with his/her way of saying sentences. However, children still acquire language in the face of a complete lack of instruction. Perhaps one of the most convincing explanations for this is **UG**.
- 3- All the languages of the world share certain properties (for example they all have subjects and predicates. These properties are called **universals** of Language.
 - The explanation for these language universals is that they exist because all speakers of human languages share the same basic innate materials for building their language's grammar.
 - 4- Recent research into language acquisition has begun to show that there is a certain amount of consistency cross-linguistically in the way children acquire language.
 - For example, children seem to go through the same stages and make the same kinds of mistakes when acquiring their language, no matter what their cultural background.

5- Finally, there are a number of biological arguments in favor of UG.

- Language seems to be human-specific. All humans, unless they have some kind of physical impairment, seem to have Language as we know it. This points towards its being a genetically endowed instinct.
- Additionally, research from neurolinguistics seems to point towards certain parts of the brain being linked to specific linguistic functions.

Explaining Language Variation

- While UG constrains (controls) the form of the grammars of all human languages, there are cross-linguistic variation; i.e. languages differ from one another.

- Languages such as English, French, Japanese, Swahili, and so on share many essential properties (those that derive from UG), but they also differ from each other in various respects.

And these differences must be learnt by the child on the basis of experience.

- For example, UG determines the basic word order in a sentence can be SVO (English), SOV (Japanese), VSO (Irish) or VOS (Malagasy) but not OSV.

- The child who is acquiring English is innately biased towards one of the common orders (i.e. SVO) when he/she hears a sentence like “John likes dogs”; The child thus rejects all the other hypotheses.

- Such cross-linguistic difference, referred to above, is dealt with in descriptive grammar.
- Using the theory of UG, linguists investigate and analyze specific languages and construct the **descriptive grammars** (we will explain it later).
- That is, while UG may specify that the basic word order in a sentence can be SVO (English), SOV (Japanese), VSO (Irish) or VOS (Malagasy) but not OSV, the descriptive grammar of English, for example, will include the word order SVO in its grammar, but the grammar of Japanese will not.

Lecture 13

In this class, we will cover the following points:

Descriptive syntax

vs.

prescriptive syntax

Explaining Language Variation

- While universal grammar (UG) constrains the form of the grammars of all human languages, there are cross-linguistic variation; i.e. languages differ from one another.
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 - And these differences must be learnt by the child on the basis of experience.
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Descriptive vs. prescriptive Grammar

- Such cross-linguistic difference, referred to above, is dealt with in descriptive grammar.
- هذا الاختلاف عبر اللغات، المشار اليه اعلاه، يتعامل مع قواعد اللغة الوصفي.
- Using the theory of UG, linguists investigate and analyze specific languages and construct the **descriptive grammars** (we will explain it soon).
- That is, while UG may specify that the basic word order in a sentence can be SVO (English), SOV (Japanese), VSO (Irish) or VOS (Malagasy) but not OSV, the **descriptive grammar** of English, for example, will include the word order SVO in its grammar, but the grammar of Japanese will not.
- The term grammar strikes terror into the hearts of many people. But you should note that there are two ways to go about writing grammatical rules: Prescriptive grammar vs. descriptive grammar.

(1) Prescriptive grammar

- This approach was taken by some grammarians, mainly in the 18th-centurey England, who set out rules for the correct or proper use of English.
- They claimed that the structure of English sentences should be like the structure of Latin.
- This view of grammar as a set of rules for the proper use of a language is still to be found today and is referred to as prescriptive grammar.
- Prescriptive grammar tells (prescribes for) people how they should speak according to some standard. In other words, These rules tell us how we are supposed to use our language .
- **Prescriptive grammar** is concerned with (prescribes) the ways in which language should be used rather than with how language is *actually* used by speakers.

- There are, of course, many prescriptive rules which generations of English teachers have attempted to instill in their pupils via corrections, as when 'who did you meet?' is corrected to 'whom did you meet?'
- Some other familiar examples of prescriptive rules for English sentences include "don't split infinitives" and "never end a sentence with a preposition".

- Let us consider the probable origin of such rules and ask whether they are appropriately applied to English language.

Rule: "you must not split an infinitive":

A- *to boldly go.* (English)

B- *to go boldly* (English)

C- *Ire (to go) audacter (boldly)* (Latin)

- 'A' is an example of split infinitive, in which the adverb '*boldly*' is used in between '*to*' and the verb '*go*'.

- According to the prescriptive rule of "you must not split an infinitive", 'A' should be corrected as in 'B' in which the adverb '*boldly*' is used after the infinitive '*to go*'.

- As we said before, prescriptive grammar is influenced by the grammar of Latin. In Latin you cannot split an infinitive since Latin infinitives are single words as in 'C' (*Ire*), not two words like English infinitives (*to go*).

- Thus, it would be appropriate in Latin Grammar to say that you cannot split an infinitive. But, it is not appropriate to carry this idea over into English, where the infinitive does NOT consist of a single word, but of two words (*to + go*).

- If English speakers and writers do produce forms like '*to boldly go*', then it would be more appropriate to say that there are structures in English which differ from those found in Latin, rather than to say that the English forms are 'bad' because they are breaking a rule of Latin.

(2) Descriptive Grammar:

It may be that using a well-established grammatical description of Latin:

- is a useful guide for studying some languages (e.g. Italian and Spanish),
- is less useful for others (e.g. English),
- and may be absolutely misleading if you want to describe some non-European languages (e.g. North American Indian languages).
- As a consequence, throughout the 20th century, a rather different approach has been taken.
- Linguists collect samples of the language they are interested in and attempt to describe the regular structures of the language as it is used, not according to some view of how it should be used.
- This is called '**descriptive grammar**', and it is the basis of most modern attempts to characterize the structures of different languages.
- In modern linguistics, we adopt a resolutely descriptive perspective concerning language. In particular, when linguists say that a sentence is **grammatical**, they don't mean that it is correct from a prescriptive point of view, but rather that it conforms to descriptive rules.

- Thus, **descriptive grammar** is concerned with the ways in which language is actually used by speakers rather than with the ways in which language should be used.
- Consider the following examples:

Example 1:

This is the house which he lives in.

- According to the prescriptive rule (never end a sentence with a preposition), this form is incorrect.
- The correct form according to the above prescriptive rule is:

This is the house in which he lives.

- According to descriptive rules, both forms are correct, as follows:

Informal:

This is the house which he lives in.

Formal:

This is the house in which he lives.

Example 2:

to boldly go

- According to the prescriptive rule (never split an infinitive), this form is incorrect.
- The correct form according to the above prescriptive rule is:

to go boldly.

Or

boldly to go

- According to descriptive rules, both forms are correct.

Example 3: consider and compare also:

- *I didn't do nothing wrong.* (although we have here Two negatives, it is correct in some dialects).
- **I do didn't wrong anything.* (universally accepted as ungrammatical)

Example 4: compare also:

What are they eating?

They are eating chips.

**What are they eating chips?* (universally accepted as ungrammatical)

- Thus, descriptive grammars aim at revealing the mental grammar which represents the knowledge a speaker of the language has.
- They do not attempt to prescribe what speakers' grammars should be.

- While certain forms (or dialects) of a language may be preferred for social or political or economic reasons, no specific dialect is linguistically superior to any other.
- A comparison between descriptive and prescriptive grammar:

Prescriptive Grammar	Descriptive Grammar
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It tends to operate with a simple contrast between correct and incorrect. - It presents rules to be followed. -It is based on the idea that there is a single right way to do things. When there is more than one way of saying something, it is generally concerned with declaring one (and only one) of the variants to be correct. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It recognizes the existence of different varieties of language; formal and informal, written and spoken, standard and nonstandard, etc. - It aims to account for the grammatical system that underlies our use of language. - It is content simply to document the variants - without passing judgment on them.

Practice:

All of the following sentences have been claimed to be ungrammatical or unacceptable by someone at some time. For each sentence, indicate whether this ungrammaticality is: a universally accepted judgment, or a prescriptive judgment or a descriptive judgment.

- *Who did you see in Las Vegas?*
- *My red is refrigerator.*
- *My friends wanted to quickly leave the party.*
- *Bunnies carrots eat.*

Who did you see in Las Vegas?

- According to the prescriptive rule of the use of 'whom' instead of 'who', this structure is ungrammatical.
- The correct form according to the above rule is:

Whom did you see in Las Vegas?

- However, according to descriptive grammar, both structures are grammatical since both of them are used by speakers of English.

My red is refrigerator.

- This structure is universally accepted as ungrammatical.
- This structure does not conform to the descriptive grammar of English.
- That is, English speakers do not produce structures like that one.

My friends wanted to quickly leave the party.

- According to the prescriptive rule of 'never split an infinitive', this structure is ungrammatical.

- The correct form according to the above rule is:

My friends wanted to leave the party quickly.

- However, according to descriptive grammar, both structures are grammatical since both of them are used by speakers of English.

- *Bunnies carrots eat.*

- - This structure is universally accepted as ungrammatical.
- - This structure does not conform to the descriptive grammar of English.
- - That is, English speakers do not produce structures like that one.