Structural Anomalies: A Glitch
in English Language Learning

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Abstract

A language cannot be fully described by grammar as it is merely a 'description' of linguistic phenomena. An average student, on the other hand, thinks of grammar as the higher most governing body of languages. When a student is taught a language grammatically, he consciously or subconsciously formulates rigid structure patterns overtime. As languages don't always work according to grammatical rules, these structures often have some anomalies, which are most of the times inexplicable.

A list of some of these structures and structural anomalies has been depicted in this research paper. The list was shown to a bunch of undergraduates from various fields and they were asked to decipher the meaning of these sentences. They were allowed full access to dictionaries and internet to ensure that their lexical deficiency wasn't the factor affecting their linguistic cognizance.

It has been found that even after referring to dictionaries and internet websites. The students weren't able to understand most of the structurally anomalous sentences. A majority of the meanings derived by them were nowhere near the intended meaning. Most of the students questioned the "grammatical soundness" of these anomalies.

After the analysis of these replies, it has been inferred that even though grammar-translation method might be an easier way for a pedagogue at the very initial stage of language learning, it affects the linguistic cognizance of a student at a more advanced stage.

Introduction

An average Indian student happens to restrict his linguistic cognizance to the lexicogrammar of English language. Given that the Grammar-Translation Method is predominant in India, students often formulate a rigid pattern of linguistic structures in their subconscious which eventually delimits their scope of analyzing any anomalous structure. This research paper aims at comparing the simple linguistic structure to the anomalous structure in order to study the cognitive hindrances in English language learning. The comparison is depicted with the use of day-to-day sentences in tabulated form. The aim here is to address the problems of a layman English learner. Hence, this research is exclusive of idioms, proverbs, poetic sentences, purple patches, word-plays, ambiguous sentences, etc. and the focus is on simple structure patterns and their anomalous semantic counterparts.

A list of some anomalous sentences was shown to a bunch of undergraduate students from various educational fields. They were allowed to use online/offline dictionaries lest the students' poor vocabulary affect the structural cognition. They were asked to decipher the meaning of the sentences and to check if they were "grammatically correct" or not. The meanings were explained by the students in a language which was suitable to them. I have given a rough translation of some of the deciphered meanings which were interesting enough to be mentioned.

Literature Review

The likes of M.A.K. Halliday, Noam Chomsky, Christian M.I.M Matthiessen, George Yule, Peter Grundy, Milind Malshe, P. N. Joshi etc. have put light on the possible contextual implications of day-to-day sentences. But their pragmatic illustrations encompass a relatively broader view. The cognitive hindrances of an average Indian student have not been addressed in contemporary pragmatics. This research paper owes a major part to the observations of the students around the Marathwada region of the state of Maharashtra. These observations have been analyzed through the viewpoint of Linguistics and English Language Teaching in India.

Discussion

The debated Grammar-Translation method might be instrumental in the very initial acquaintance of a layman Indian to the English language. But this approach of teaching imbibes rigid structures in a student, which is not very handy after the initial stage of learning. Linguistics has come a long way, from being spearheaded by adamant prescriptive grammarians to flexible descriptive grammarians. This paradigm shift owes to the fact that prescriptive grammar cannot always explain all Linguistic scenarios and phenomena. The present day India, however, doesn't seem to have come out of the shackles of prescriptive grammar, as a large number of students are taught with the help of Grammar-Translation method even after their initial stage of learning. It has been found that such students restrict themselves to the grammatical structures and when confronted with a structural anomaly, they fail to understand the pragmatic aspect of that anomalous sentence. Here is an analysis of some of the structural anomalies. The anomalous sentence is depicted in bold.

Example 1

Structure: Subject + am/is/are + Object

I am a boy.
He is happy.
I am fast.
I am home.

The structure S + am/is/are + O generally means that the Subject "is" the Object or the subject possesses the attribute described by the object. The examples, "I am a boy", "He is happy", "I am fast" more or less mean that "someone is something". But here comes our anomaly, "I am home". This sentence is far from the meaning that the Narrator is an entity called "home". It simply means that the person "reached" home or is "at" home. Many students understand this sentence in a context but they couldn't decide whether it is grammatically correct or not.

Example 2 (A)

Structure: Subject + make/made + Object + attribute/predicate

Horror movies make me anxious.
He made me angry.
You make me happy.

> **My mom made me a sandwich.**

The structure implies that "something makes/made something". A mother, however, isn't likely to execute the metamorphosis of her own child by turning him/her into a sandwich. An elementary learner is often amused after reading such anomalous sentence for the first time. Students understand this one in a context too, but again they question its correctness.

Example 2 (B)

I will buy a gift for you.
He will buy a cup of tea for me.
I will buy you a drink.
Would you buy me a chocolate?

Example 2 (C)

Would you sing a song for me?
Would you sing me a song?

The bolded sentences in Example 2 (b) and example 2(c) might be very common and would not require any explanation for the native speakers and some of the well versed Indian English speakers. But as far as basic Indian learners are concerned; it has been found that most of them question the grammatical correctness of the structure even if they manage to decipher the correct meaning.

Example 3
Structure: Subject + Play + Object

He plays the violin.
Let's play a movie.
You should play football with me.
He should play King Lear.
I played Cricket.
You played me.

I am going to play innocent with him.
The snake often plays dead in a combat.

In the above structure pattern, the unusualness of the use of 'Object' in the anomalous structures is the main concern for an English language trainer. By the verb "play", an average Indian student expects the following object to be a game or a movie or an instrument or a role. In the last three sentences, however, the word play implies "to deceive" in "You played me" whereas it means "to act so" in "play innocent" and "play dead". It has been observed that students find the object to be out of place or unusual. It has been observed that they have trouble deciphering the meaning of the anomalous sentences and most of the times, wrong meanings are attributed.

When they were shown the line "You played me.", many thought that the sentence refers to a game which was played between two people.

Whereas, "I am going to play innocent with him" was understood by many, it's grammatical correctness was questioned. A few even went on to ask whether "innocent" was a game.

In the last anomalous sentence, "Snake kills the opponent", "Snake is deadly in fight", "Snake plays with the dead body of the opponent" were some of the meanings derived by students. Not to mention many thought of it as an incorrect sentence.

Example 4

Structure: Come + Noun + Predicate

Come John, Let's go for a walk.
Come boy, I have a news for you.
Come September, we go to Paris.

The imperative nature of the above structure is the matter of confusion for many here. The imperative word "come" when followed by a "Noun" generally implies that the noun followed immediately by the word "come" is addressed to. This is pretty evident in the first two examples. But the month of "September" seldom takes orders from a mortal. "In the upcoming September" is the meaning expected in this type of sentence formation.

Most of the students understood the meaning of the sentence, but the grammar was questioned by many.

Example 5

Structure: Subject + is + a + Object

He is a boy.
It is a factory.
The car is a mess.
The mission is a go.

The structure expects the object to be a 'noun' but in our anomaly the object is a 'verb'. "Something is a go" might border on being termed as a slang usage and a colloquial phrase, which simply means that one has the permission to do something.

The grammar in this sentence was outright incorrect for many and the meanings derived by them were nowhere near desired. "The mission is to go somewhere", The mission is going on", were some of the meanings derived by the students.

Example 6

Structure: Subject + verb + object + Adverb

I messed it badly.
She did it effortlessly.
You ran the race outstandingly.
I messed it big time.

In this structure an average student expects the last word to be an 'adverb'. "Messed something big time" is a colloquial way of saying that something has gone bad extremely. Even after explaining the usage of such phrases, students happen to bug themselves with the feeling that the sentence is not "grammatically correct".

Example: 7

Structure: Subject + Verb + my way + out of + something.

I found my way out of the forest.
She swam her way out of the river.
I mathsed my way out of the problem.
He bribed his way out of the jail.

The above structural anomaly owes to the process of "verbification". Verbification is the process of employing a Noun as a verb. The usage of nouns like 'Google', 'Whatsapp', 'Photoshop', 'Xerox' as verbs has been accepted by most of the students as these things have caught on very widely. But when some other nouns are 'verbified' and used with the phrase "my/his way out of", it becomes difficult for the students to decipher the meaning of such sentences.

Many students do understand the rough meaning of "He bribed his way out of jail." But they do question its grammatical correctness.

"I mathsed my way out of the problem", however, was a tough nut to crack. It has been observed that the students weren't able to derive any meaning at all even after spending a lot of time. And when told that the sentence means "I used 'maths' as a tool to come out of the problem", its grammar and credibility was questioned.

Example: 8

A person I know works as a banker.
There is a boy who works as an actor.

This girl I know doesn't like mangoes.

When we refer to someone who isn't around, "a person I know", or "there is a person" I know are generally used in India. But "this person I know" isn't so widely used. Many thought that the speaker is referring to a girl who is present at the time of speaking.

Example: 9 Structure : Subject + auxiliary verb+ adjective + Object

He is a nice person.
She is a tall girl.
John is a dog person.
They are all tea people.

Example 9 is one of the best examples of how a structurally unconventional way of expression could lead the learner to unexpected derivations. Let's have a look at the third example: instead of saying "John likes dogs" one could also say "John is a dog person". Most of the students derived a completely unintended meaning of this sentence. "John is a mean person", "John is a bad person" were most of the meanings derived by the students. When they were told the intended meaning, it took them some time to digest it.

Example 10 Subject + auxiliary verb + doing + object

He is doing homework.
She is doing a movie.
I am doing dishes.

In this example, some came to the conclusion that the person is "making dishes" whereas some questioned the grammatical correctness even after having derived the intended meaning.

Example 11 Structure: Subject + auxiliary verb + left + for + object

He has left for Mumbai.
She has left for work.
He has left for the day.

Example 11 was one of the most confusing sentences. The intended meaning here is "He has left for home after the day is over and is not likely to return before tomorrow." Many derived completely opposite meaning. "He has left to work for the whole day." was the meaning derived by many. Some did come to the intended meaning but still questioned the grammatical correctness of the sentence.

Example 12 Structure: Get + the+ Object

Get the hint.
Get the point.
Get the coffee.

| **Get the door.** |
| **I'm busy, please get the phone.** |

In example 12, the intended meaning of "Get the door" is generally to "open the door". However many confused it with "literally getting a door". Some thought it was another way of saying "get out", whereas many doubted its grammar. The last example needed a more elaborate context as "get the phone" would have been ambiguous as the sentence also means "to literally bring a phone". But in this particular context, the meaning is generally limited to "pick up the phone/ answer the phone." Most of the participants got this one right. There were still some who confused it with "literally bringing/getting a phone."

Example 13 Structure: Verb + subject + to + object

| Take me to a movie. |
| Ask him to dance. |
| Tell her to stop. |
| **Sing me to sleep.** |

In example 13, the usage of an eccentric verb at the beginning of the last sentence turned out to be the catalyst of confusion among participants. Most of them were unable to derive any meaning. Many were baffled and questioned the grammatical veracity when they were told that the intended meaning was "Sing for me till I sleep / Sing for me so that I could sleep."

These were few of the structural anomalies. The grammar-translation method evidently increases the dependency on dictionaries. And most of the words, phrasal verbs, idioms, etc., are available on dictionaries and websites. So, such hindrances can be removed with the help of dictionaries, thesauri, etc. But the case with these structural anomalies was different. It has been found that the students weren't able to understand the meaning of such sentences despite having access to offline/online dictionaries. The only thing which eases this kind of linguistic cognizance is a satisfactory exposure to the language through various mediums.

An average Indian student might be familiar with English grammar as it has always been a part of his education. However, Indians aren't used to using the language so frequently. The four basic components which govern the language, i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing aren't a part of an average Indian's day-to-day life as far as English is concerned. And this is the major reason he isn't able to digest these eccentricities, which in turn, mars the crucial factors important in learning English. The notion of "grammatical correctness" is deeply rooted in an Indian when he tries to speak English. After coming across such structural anomalies, students happen to question their judgment of "correct and incorrect". They start looking at normal sentences doubtfully. All this results into lack of confidence and many a time students lose their interest while learning the language.

Another problem with structures is that they come with a comprehensive explanation. And an anomaly in that structure is most of the times inexplicable. A student who has been taught via the grammar-translation method is accustomed to getting or demanding an explanation of everything taught to him. And this is why an anomalous sentence is quite a puzzle for an average Indian student. It has been observed that such occurrences could prove to be morally discouraging for a student and the very will of learning this daunting

language is challenged, albeit with a miniscule intensity. The concern is; English isn't short of such anomalous sentences.

Such structural anomalies aren't peculiar to English only. These are found in many other languages. Linguistically speaking, the possibility of every language having some amount of such structural anomalies cannot be denied. A study of the structural anomalies of the first language of these students will be helpful in the effective analysis of the problem. Some of the structural anomalies in Marathi are tabulated as follow:

Example 1

Structure: Kartā (subject) + kriyāpad (verb) + sahāyak kriyāpad (auxiliary verb)

Mi baslo āhe.
Ti basli āhe.
Tire basla āhe.
Pangat basli āhe.

In example 1, the subject used in the last two sentences is quite anomalous. The general meaning of this type of sentence structure is "Someone has sat down". The peculiar use of the subject in the last two sentences however, morphs the general meaning completely. The third example means, "The tire is deflated." And the fourth example means, "A group of people is eating (while sitting down)."

Example 2

Structure: Kartā (Subject) + Karma (Object) + Kela/keli/kele [To Do (verb)]

Mi bhāji keli.
Tine pohe kele.
Mi chahā tāklā.
Tu bhāt lāv.

Marathi has different verbs for some specific actions. In this case, "making tea" or "making rice" takes a different verb. Whereas a more general verb for doing something in Marathi is "karane".

Example 3

Tyāne vajan vādhavala.
Tu āhārācha pramān vādhav.
Tine bāngadyā vādhavalyā.

The general sense of the sentence structure in example 3 is "to increase something". The third example on the other hand, drastically changes the general meaning. The intended meaning of the sentence is "she broke her bangles". Simply using the Marathi counterpart of "she broke her bangles" is not considered to be apt according to Indian decorum.

Example 4

To Punyālā kasā gelā?

Radha tithe kaśi geli?
Tuzā paper kasā gelā?

The sentence structure of the Example 4 generally means "How did something/someone 'go' (somewhere)?" The intended meaning of the bolded sentence is "How was your paper?" which is evidently an anomaly.

Interestingly, students are comparatively comfortable with the structural anomalies in their own mother tongue. Moreover, they don't seem to even notice these structural anomalies if it hasn't been brought to their notice. The reason behind this is evident; a lot more usage of the mother tongue than English. A student isn't "taught" his mother tongue at all. In fact he picks it up gradually by constant exposure to the language. There isn't any grammar involved in the "initial stage" of learning and hence the student doesn't formulate a rigid structure pattern in his mind. Most of the grammatical flaws which are natural at the initial stage of learning are eventually corrected by the student himself. Some of the extremely rare rules might be taught to him grammatically. (Which are too few to have any effect on their linguistic cognizance.)

Conclusion and Future Study

The very basic stage of English Language Learning is dealt with grammar-translation method. Based on the above argument, this seems to be a major problem for English Language Learners in India. As the comparison between English and first language suggests, grammar shouldn't be introduced to the students at the very initial stage of learning. Grammar should be treated as a tool reserved for the final touch-ups in a person's diction. Moreover, maximum exposure to the target language seems to be the most natural way. This might be a little challenging in the initial stage but would be a lot more effective in the long run.

The concept of structural anomalies wasn't inclusive of anomalies in idioms, proverbs, oxymorons, ambiguous sentences, poetic sentences, purple patches, word-plays, etc. Studies can be done on the anomalies in these types of sentences as well. In this research paper, structural anomalies in Marathi were compared to English. Studies can be done on some of the other regional languages in India in order to undertake a comparative study.

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