Grammar Beyond Recipe

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ABSTRACT

The mystery that surrounds grammar is not grammar's own in the sense that it is not generated from within grammar itself. What obscures grammar, what ails our true appreciation and understanding of it is our erroneous approach to it, which instead of permeating the core of grammar, the essence, loses itself in the web of rules and regulations, the surface reality. The present article emphasizes that it is time we moved away from such a misleading approach that presents grammar as an arid, contrived, and lifeless thing, in order to realize the beauty of grammar, how lifelike it is.

Keywords: Grammar, Addressivity, Utterance, Usage, Rules, Speech communication, Context, Nativization

Introduction

"What is grammar?" If this question is posed to a commoner, he would probably scratch his head and reply that it is nothing short of a jigsaw puzzle. The connoisseur, on the other hand, would not mind rambling on about it, tirelessly pointing out its different facets, highlighting its nuances, all of which ultimately leading to establish this impression that grammar is a treasure trove of rules and principles, a storehouse of formulas that need to be assiduously explored and studied, and then to be practiced hard in order to realize the full efficacy. This has been the authoritative understanding of grammar that has perpetually predominated the budding minds from generation to generation. And it is unfortunate that it is thought/fashioned so, for this notion undermines the very capacity of language to be rooted in life. The point of view that can elucidate and throw further light on this matter here comes from William Somerset Maugham. In his autobiographical work The Summing Up,

Maugham, the great British writer of the 20th century, talks at length about the dual facets of the English language: one that is overly theoretical, that strictly adheres to logic, almost in a slavish way, and the other, racy, vigorous, exuding common sense, which breathes life into the language. He discerns the propensity to overemphasize the former, the strictly grammatical one, which is sheer rule based, formulaic and, in that sense, pretentious and affected, at the expense of the latter that stems from our day to day life, which he refers to as usage. In contrast to the common tendency, he declares, in an unabashed way, his preference for an expression which is simple and lifelike over one which is grammatical, asserting that grammar, first and foremost, is "common speech formulated" (30). This shift in emphasis from artificial rules to usage beckons to a change in usual approach to dealing with grammar itself. It asserts the need for a grammarian to address the life situations before he addresses grammar itself for it is the context which decides the rules

and not vice versa, it is the connectivity with life that instills sense and significance into the otherwise inert rules, thus making them extant. The opinion held by the American linguist, Diane Larsen-Freeman in her article *Grammar of Choice*, is worth paying attention to in the present context.

> I do believe that if grammar were better understood, not only would it be taught and learned better, but also the rich potential of its system would be admired, thus enhancing attitudes toward grammar. Teachers and their students would appreciate how inextricably bound up with being human grammar is. Rather than being a linguistic straitjacket, grammar affords speakers of a particular language a great deal of flexibility in the ways they can express propositional, or notional, meaning and how they present themselves in the world. (105)

Larsen-Freeman acknowledges the truth that "grammar relates to linguistic form, about which speakers have little choice" (106). However, like Maugham she is of this contention that it is not the rules per se but the "use dimension" (109) of those rules that ultimately holds sway as she says, "Grammar not only consists of rules governing form; grammatical knowledge consists of knowing when to use the forms to convey meanings that match our intentions in particular contexts" (106). She speaks about how grammatical structures are not there only to denote or represent their fixed interpretations – those that arise from sheer formalism – but also, more importantly, to connote or indicate as diverse and wide an area as our inner sphere, our attitude, mood, and inclinations – our psychic disposition. Larsen-Freeman's point of view in this regard opens up the purview of treating

grammar. She meticulously brings to the fore extensive structural patterns in order to bring home the fact that grammar is too keenly attached to the beats of life to allow any movement away from there. The following are some of the instances she cites to buttress her point in her article *Grammar of Choice*:

1. **Psychological Distance**: In this section, Larsen-Freeman discusses how psychological proximity, emotional attachment can be conveyed by simply bringing in present form of tense where past could have easily sufficed.

She borrows the following example from Riddle (1986):

a) Anne: Jane just bought a Volvo

John: Maureen *has* one.

Anne: John, you've got to quit talking about Maureen as if you were still going together. You broke up three months ago. (109)

(Larsen- Freeman points out that Anne's anger here is justified because she thinks that John still feels close to Maureen as he uses the PRESENT TENSE to talk about her.)

2. **Politeness**: Here she points out how a change in tense structure, from present to past, can exude a sense of politeness and transform the whole ambience.

The examples cited are:

a) Could you help me with my homework?

b) Can you help me with my homework? (110)

(The first sentence sounds more polite

compared to the second one)

3. **Moderation**: Even a change in grammatical person can be a significant contribution as it can add a layer to what is expressed ,moderating to a considerable extent the meaning that is conveyed. Here Larsen-Freeman cites this example from Yule(1996, p.11) to make her point:

a) You didn't clean up.

b) Somebody didn't clean up. (111)

(The second sentence being the moderated version of the previous one)

4. **Tact**: Larsen-Freeman talks about how one can simply evade the offensiveness, the very rudeness of a direct negative expression by simply choosing the "positive polarity counterpart in a negative equative" (111). She comes up with this example from (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman,1999) :

a) Moe is dumber than Curly.

b) Moe is not as intelligent as Curly. (112)

(The second sentence sounds less offensive as compared to the previous one)

5. **Power**: Here in this section, she brings up the issue of how even an innocent looking simple clause structure can be a subject matter of 'Critical Discourse Analysis', revealing the power imbalances in society. She throws light on how a study of who are holding the subject –object positions in the sentence can in a very subtle way indicate who are holding power and who are dictated to in society.

Thus Larsen-Freeman's musings on grammar emphatically establish the indivisible connection that grammatical structures have with life situations. Although this propensity of grammar to correspond to life is always there, we tend to remain unaware of it as we are occupied only with the peripheral aspects, the officious details of rules and regulations, which are hammered into us day and night. As early as the 1950s, in his work "Speech Genres", the eminent Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin projected his notion that the essence of language is not in its being a symmetrical, unified, synchronized whole, a perfect system – as Saussure would like to put it – but rather in its being dialogic, in reaching the other, in its communicative function. He calls this the addressivity of language and it is this which marks a point of departure from the traditional perspective that presents language as a contrived thing, looks at it "from speaker's standpoint as if there were only one speaker who does not have any necessary relation to other participants in speech communication" (67). In contrast, under this fresh , new perspective, a sentence no more remains a sentence, a mere mechanized expression, a lifeless unit of language but becomes what he calls 'an utterance' in a live speech, a real, live situation , being very much addressed to a listener who is active and expected to respond to it either in agreement or in disagreement. This transformation of sentence into utterance is only possible if it enters real life, the concrete moment of speech communication, for Bakhtin argues that as long as sentence remains outside the speech communication, it is a neutral unit of language, that "belongs to nobody" (84), and that "in itself has no expressive aspect" (85). He adds, "It has neither a direct contact with reality (with an extra verbal situation) nor a direct relation to others' utterances; it does not have semantic fullness of value; and it has no capacity to

determine directly the responsive position of the other speaker, that is, it cannot evoke a response" (74). Bakhtin calls such a representation of language "a scientific abstraction" (69) and dismisses it, saying that it utterly fails to indicate the actual phenomenon, "the complex and multifaceted process of active speech communication" (68). He asserts that a language tool, whether it is lexical, morphological or syntactic, comes alive, acquires real value only when it is applied into a particular reality, "particular real conditions of speech communication" (86). It is in such a concrete moment, according to him, there is the possibility of real understanding with the listeners actively responding. He adds:

> And the speaker himself is oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding. He does not expect passive understanding that, so to speak, only duplicates his own idea in someone else's mind. Rather, he expects response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances – his own and others' – with which his given utterance enters into one kind of relation or another (builds on them, polemicized with them or simply presumes that they are already known to the listener). (69)

Such an interpretation of language that transforms a sentence into an utterance entails that a quest for meaning does not begin or end in the words or sentences themselves but gets oriented towards the concrete moment of utterance, the real life situation, the context. Bakhtin points out that the sentence or a word as a unit of language is neutral and "in itself has no expressive aspect" (85). It gets its emotional coloring, expressive tone only when it is applied to real conditions, circumstances and situations of life. He reiterates "only the contact between language meaning and the concrete reality that takes place in the utterance can create the spark of expression" (87). To prove his point, he alludes to those instances when sentences and words come to gain altogether different meaning, weight and expression solely based upon the contexts of their utterance.

Bakhtin's observation that meaning is not generated by the system of language itself, rather it is the outcome of the addresivity of language, its application in a concrete situation, a real moment of utterance, is made evident when we look into grammatical structures and how they operate. The following are some instances:

Tag questions: The usual guideline and understanding about the tag question is that a positive statement is to take a negative tag and a negative statement, a positive tag. But this simply fails to capture the intricate details of a real moment of utterance. As Michael Swan comments in "Practical English Usage":

> In speech, we can show the exact meaning of a question tag. If the tag is a real question – if we really want to know something and are not sure of the answer – we use a rising intonation: the voice goes up.
>
> The meeting is at four o'clock, isn't it?
>
> If the tag is not a real question – if we are sure of the answer we use a falling intonation: the voice goes down.
>
> It's a beautiful day, isn't it? (479)

One more illustration is this instruction that one

can use both negative and positive tag "will you?" and "won't you?" for a positive imperative as if it hardly makes any difference which one is used. What the rule misses out is the voice of entreaty, the urgency in the negative tag addressed to the other in a concrete, live moment. Cited below are the two examples by F.T.Wood in "A Remedial English Grammar for Foreign Students." Wood chooses to make the distinction between the two by asserting that the latter has the urgency in the voice, a resonance of an earnest request.

1. Have another cup of tea, will you?

2. Have another cup of tea, won't you? (143)

Tense structure: Tense structures as well acquire different tone, colour and meaning when oriented to address different contexts of reality.

For instance, the application of a present progressive form where a 'future' is the norm can produce altogether different connotations.

1. I will meet them tomorrow to solve your problem.

2. I am going to meet them tomorrow to solve your problem.

3. I am meeting them tomorrow to solve your problem.

The change, the bending of the rule in (2) and (3) here is engendered by the necessity to address the concerned voice of the other, to assure him, to give him solace. Thus progressive form in this live context comes to reflect the genuine intention of the speaker and gains a very personal, emotional coloring that a future form, being neutral in nature, can never evoke.

Similarly, the PRESENT PERFECT is used for an action which got over in the past, just to project the inner reality that our mind is not through with the action yet, it being vivid there.

Addressing the real life context, revealing the aspects of the concrete situation is the priority once again when the PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS is used even though action is not in continuation at present. The following are the two examples from "Living English Structure" by W.Stannard Allen.

1. I'm cold because I've been swimming for an hour.

2. I'm very tired; I've been running around the town all day. (82)

What the flouting of the rules achieves here is that it has enabled us to feel the pulse of the real moment. In both the examples, the very use of the PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS serves to bring to the fore the uninterrupted, strenuous nature of the activities whose effects are still felt by the speakers long after the actions are over. Hence, the justification for the first halves of both the sentences: "I'm cold", "I'm very tired".

This adherence of grammar to living moments betrays the sublime subordination of language itself to life that Bakhtin alludes to when he speaks about the influence that a speech community – a group of people living together, following a particular tradition and culture, sharing similar tastes and preferences, a common approach to life – can have on the language they utter in their quotidian life. English, although a foreign language in many parts of the world, has ceased to be the other tongue for many living there and as it has entered the life and time, the

psyche of theirs, it has changed from its original pristine self: it has got itself tainted – as the purists would like to point out – but ,on the other hand, in the process it has also gained vigour which has given it a kind of longevity that would not be possible if it simply had a cloistered existence in the bookish world. Such is the case with English in India as pointed out by N. Krishnaswamy and Lalitha Khrishnaswamy in *The Story of English in India*:

> This enormous increase in the English-using population resulted in the use of English of Indians, by Indians, for Indians. After independence, there was not much contact with the native users of English like there was before independence. As pointed out earlier, cut off from the native variety and driven by nationalist sentiments, Indians during the freedom struggle were using English as second language, and not as foreign language to understand or express British culture. This shift in focus, combined with the large number of English-using Indians necessitated a new variety of English with local adaptations. (142)

And this new variety is a conglomeration of many voices which

> range from Malayali English, Tamilian English, Punjabi English, Bengali English, Hindi English to 'standard Indian English'. In addition, there are also a number of sub-standard varieties widely used: Butler English, Bearer English, Baboo English, Bazaar English, Cantonment English, and several code-mixed varieties of English with local variations. (142)

Indeed this has been the picture in general in the post-colonial era .The language has carried on with its piggyback ride wherein it did not originate. It has lingered in all those countries where there was once the colonial rule, getting adapted, shaped and reshaped by a teeming multitude who have adopted and embraced the language as their own. Edward W. Schneider, an eminent linguist, calls this adaptation a process of 'nativization''. Shedding light on India in this context, Schneider speaks at length about how English here has acquired new dimensions as a consequence of 'nativization' at all these levels: Phonetic, Lexical, Morphosyntactic, and Lexicosyntactic (Schneider 2007).

In consonance with Schneider's findings is the observation made by Braj B.Kachru:

> This contextually appropriate hybridization and adaptation has been the fate of most human languages, particularly those that have crossed their historical boundaries and were planted in other linguistic and cultural ecologies. The English language, as any other present or earlier transplanted language, is facing its ecological karma, and is woven into the nativized webs of language structure and its functional appropriateness. (B. Kachru, 2005:255-56)

And all this is both inevitable and desirable if we do not forget telling ourselves that language is a living entity, an organic whole.

Conclusion: The study above makes it amply clear why it is important that we move away from the stereotyped approaches to teaching grammar. "Grammar Translation" method, mechanical drillings, and other traditional methods of teaching, which are highly practiced, are rather ill-suited to dealing with grammar. They are extraneous as they fail to address grammar in its totality. It is imperative that the

situational approach to teaching language be followed so that all the facets of language including grammar are imparted to learners as they grow naturally out of situations that mirror reality. Learners would then subsume grammar in the true spirit of it, as rooted in life, and not as severed from it.

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