

5SSEL026 – Language Construction
Lecture 5
Grammar 3

This week we are looking at three grammatical features: Pronominalisation, Conjunction, and Discourse. These three features represent an advanced level of grammaticalization, and therefore a later stage in the development of language. For some linguists, a communication system cannot be described as “language” until these features are in place.

PRONOUNS

Pronouns should be a simple feature of language: they represent the speaker, the listener or listeners, and the referent or referents – the traditional three voices of speech. However, culture usually overlays this simple model with all kinds of other significances, creating a complex system of role representations which differs from language to language; and then language itself generates structural overlays on top of the cultural significances. Grammaticalization does not happen before or after cultural change, the two work incrementally to keep a language in constant movement.

The pronoun system maps to the speech act on three levels: the grammatical structure of language, the speech-act roles, and the communicative act. In turn, the communicative act maps to the process and the event of communication.

- At the **event** level, an **instigator** creates an **action** involving the **recipient** in an **event**;
- At the **process** level, a **source** creates a **relationship** with a **destination** about a **cause**;
- At the **communication** level, a **speaker** creates a **message** for a **listener** about a **referent**;
- At the level of **roles**, the **first person** generates an **utterance** directed at the **second person** about the **third person**;
- At the level of **language**, a **subject** combines with a **verb** and **object** to make a two-argument form, to which an **indirect object** is attached by an adposition.

These five levels all share a similar structure, indicating that the three-argument form represents a fundamentally human way of looking at the world. However, there is an important difference between the three higher levels (event, process and communication) and the two lower levels (roles and language): the higher levels are about the components around the message, the lower levels are about the process inside the message. This shows us that the three-argument form is not limited to a particular level of communicative cognition, it is used as a template at several levels.

PRONOUNS: WHERE THEY CAME FROM

Once upon a time, humans were able to cognitively model relationships between other individuals in their tribe, but they had no need to share them (remember lecture 3, the dilemmas of language). In that state, all they needed were third-person markers to represent individuals in their cognitive models. They are likely to have had personal labels (the cognitive equivalent of names) for each member of their tribe, but they probably also thought about relationships using generalised placeholders (the cognitive equivalent of third-person pronouns). Then came the sharing of modelled relationships ...

For this module we need not be concerned about how we began sharing our social calculus; we do it now, so it must have begun somehow. However, once relationship models were being shared, a new dilemma appeared: how to deal with offered models which are about me, and how to offer models which are about you. Very quickly a way to represent “you” and “me” (the roles in communication, rather than the individuals) would have

developed; and from there comes the whole Pandora’s box of pronouns.

PRONOUNS: THE ENGLISH CHOICES

The pronoun system of a language is a product of the cultural views behind a language, and they provide a better window onto that culture than almost any other word type. We tend to think that the ways we name and describe things beyond the discourse (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) is the best indicator of our culture, but the way we approach the communicative act itself – and each other – is a better indicator.

In English we use a strange amalgam system which reflects our preoccupation with gender beyond the communicative event (the third person *he/she/it*), and our lack of interest inside the event: the first person is ungendered, although it does have a plurality marker (*we/us* instead of *I/me*); but in the second person we conflate both gender and number into a single word. This reflects a healthy level of equalisation in conversational English, but it was not always so: we used to have a familiar second-person form (*thee/thou*), similar to modern Spanish and French. In some languages (e.g. some Burmese languages) there are complete sets of pronouns used for particular groups¹.

One particular pronoun compromise that seems to be very common, despite it also being highly obfuscatory, is the first-person plural (*we/us*). This pronoun can be used as an indicator of inclusion and as an indicator of commitment: it is a powerful tool in the formation of alliances and as a marker of those alliances; yet in many languages (and in most of the world’s major languages) its many functions are represented by a single lexical item. Chinese differentiates between the inclusive and exclusive *we* (whether *we* includes *you* or not), but it does not differentiate between singular and plural inclusion (one other or a group of others). In addition, *we* can sometimes be used to represent a single person (*me* in my several social roles) – although this is a usage often reserved for royalty. The reason for the obfuscatory semantics of the first-person plural may lie in what I call the politician’s *we*, a *we* that often means *you*. By conflating the different *we*’s into an [everybody & nobody] *we*, the politician is able to create an image of themselves as “representing from the front”.

One final – and very new – feature of English pronouns is the freedom to choose the third-person pronouns you prefer others to use about you. A common choice is to be referred to with *they/them/their* rather than *she/her/hers* or *he/him/his*, which removes the gendering baggage that goes with the two sex-based choices. Another choice is *it/it/its*, which also removes species, and fully divorces pronouns from genetic influences. A growing choice is the Spivak system of *e/em/eir*; these pronouns carry no cultural baggage other than personal choice. Your language could explore this pronominal freedom in more detail, should you wish to do so.

It is possible for a language to work without a pronouns, but it is unlikely to work without some kind of pronominalisation (see Pravic). Reflecting the culture of your language in the pronominal system is one of the easiest ways to make your language feel both culturally and linguistically different.

POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS

In English, possessive pronouns come in two types: as Adjectivals which attach to the noun item possessed, and as stand-alone noun forms representing the item possessed. The adjectival form acts in many ways like an article (it occurs at the start of a noun phrase, it cannot be used with other articles, and there can be only one per noun phrase), so it is often called a possessive determiner. French has possessive determiners (*mon, mes, votre,*

nos, etc.), but it does not have nominal possessives; instead, it forms them using *à* with the object pronoun form (e.g. *la coupe est à moi: the cup is [of/to/with?] me*). While possessive pronouns do sometimes indicate possession, they more often indicate a relationship between a person and an object, e.g. *her hopes and fears, her daughters, her responsibilities*.

REFLEXIVE PRONOUNS

Reflexive pronouns are used when the recipient of an action is also the instigator of the action, e.g. *the cat washes itself*. They are available in many languages, but they are not a vital component of any language; and, while they are available in English, they seem to be a rather disorganised group. Your language may well be able to do things better.

In English, reflexives are needed because most pronouns can have a range of references, creating polysemy. The first-person singular always refers to the speaker, so is unambiguous (which is why *I like myself* and *I like me* have the same meaning logically); but the first-person plural, second person, and third-person plural all have a range of possible meanings; and the third-person singular forms are so common that they rely on context for meaning, and the context is not always available. For instance, in *he likes him* there is no guarantee that he and him refer to the same person (in fact, the very existence of the reflexive form *himself* creates a default context that they do not co-refer). Of course, this polysemy is usually avoided by using nouns (*Joan likes Mary*), and this nominal form could, in your language, also be used reflexively. *Joan likes Joan's self*, or even *Joan likes Joanself*, may feel awkward in English (although not strictly wrong), but they could be acceptable forms in your language.

There is one final puzzle with English reflexives for which there seems no answer: why do the first- and second-person forms use the possessive pronoun as the root (*myself, ourselves, yourself, yourselves*), but the third-person form uses the object form as the root (*herself, himself, itself, themselves*)?

INTERROGATIVE PRONOUNS

Interrogative pronouns replace the noun phrase not with a placeholder but with a query marker. So *Joan is in the orchard; gardening is her job* can be replaced by *she is in the orchard; it is her job*, and turned into a query with *who is in the orchard; what is her job?* There are, however, other forms which operate in this way:

December 24th is Yule ⇒ *Today is Yule* ⇒ *When is Yule?*
It is exciting at the funfair ⇒ *It is exciting there* ⇒ *It is exciting where?*

There are generalised words doing a similar job to pronouns in the *when* and *where* constructs; so why don't the six main interrogative pronouns in English (*who, what, when, where, how, why*) all work in the same way? This is something you could address in your language.

CONJUNCTIONS

Conjunctions act between segments of language to create causal or associational links between those segments. The segments of language linked by conjunctions are called the conjuncts. There are three types of conjunction in English:

- Coordinating conjunctions, of which there are seven: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*, often represented by the acronym **FANBOYS**;
- Subordinating conjunctions, of which there are many;
- Correlative conjunctions, of which there are only a few, but nobody seems to know how many.

CONJUNCTIONS: COORDINATING

At the word level, coordinating conjunctions can occur between words of the same type, but not words of different types (except nouns and pronouns). At the phrase level, conjunctions can occur between two noun phrases (e.g. *[the little green goblin] or [the only Feng Shui expert in Neasden]*), two verb phrases (e.g. *Joan [had been sleeping] but [was now awake]*), or two adpositional phrases (e.g. *[out of the shade] yet [not into the light]*). In English, however, but you cannot mix phrase types. At the clause level, conjunctions can occur between main clauses (e.g. *[we went out] even though [it was raining]*) or subordinate clauses (e.g. *we saw the man who [had no ears] and [couldn't hear]*).

Coordinating conjunctions establish a logical balance between the two conjuncts, so the two conjuncts have to be grammatically comparable. When the conjuncts are nouns, pronouns, noun phrases or clauses, the conjunction also acts similarly to an adposition, allowing extra arguments to be attached to an utterance; but the way conjunctions semantically attach those extra arguments differs from the way adpositions attach arguments.

CONJUNCTIONS: SUBORDINATING

Subordinating conjunctions may appear at first to be grammatically interchangeable, but they each have quite specific areas of use. For instance, *since* requires the second event to have happened before the first event, so the tense used in the first event limits the tenses available for the second event; *if* requires the first event to be modal, while *so that* requires the second event to be modal; *lest* is always followed by a present-tense main clause; and so on. English subordinating conjunctions do not map to a common format, making them difficult to define grammatically; you may wish to review this in your own language.

Another idiosyncratic feature of some subordinating conjunctions is that they can break the rule about balancing the conjuncts. For instance, *[Joan baked cakes] until [nightfall]* conjoins a main clause and a noun, while *[Joan sang] when [happy]* conjoins a main clause and an adjective. What is happening here can be explained by introducing elliptical words (*[{it was} nightfall]*, *[{she was} happy]*), but all that does is introduce unicorns to explain why the rules aren't working. The reality is that English is complex and weird, and your language can be, too.

CONJUNCTIONS: CORRELATIVE

Correlative conjunctions are conjunctions that give warning that a conjunction is happening. They consist of two lexical items: the introducer, which occurs before the two conjuncts, and the conjoiner, which occurs between the two conjuncts. Usually the introducer is a subordinating conjunction while the conjoiner is a coordinating conjunction, but this is not always the case (e.g. *as ... as*). Also, while many correlative conjunctions balance the two conjuncts, not all do; *whether* seems to balance only the last lexical item, while *not only ... but also* seems to have its own grammatical rules.

CONJUNCTIONS: RANDOM MUSINGS

It is possible to use only correlative conjunctions in your language, so all conjunctions are signalled ahead, e.g. *So [Joan would eat the apple] even if [it tasted sour]*. It may even be that this process is already underway in English, as the habit of beginning an utterance with *so* seems to be increasing.

You can use multiple conjunctions in a text; but be aware of the levels at which they are being used. For instance:

We will go to the cinema and get some ice cream or go for a pizza

Can be read as

[[We will go to the cinema] **and** [get some ice cream]] **or** [go for a pizza]

or

[We will go to the cinema] **and** [[get some ice cream] **or** [go for a pizza]]

You may wish to find ways of preventing this polysemic formation in your language.

English makes a distinction between “true” conjunctions (e.g. *but*) and conjunctive adverbs (e.g. *however*). Your language does not have to acknowledge this difference.

Even the coordinating conjunctions can occasionally break the balanced conjunct rule, e.g. [[*Who or what is the President*] **and** [*why*]? Rather than generating a set of exceptions to the rule, it may be easier to ignore it – or devise ways to make it unbreakable in your language.

Sometimes quite simple sentences can become quite impenetrable due to the way the conjuncts fit together semantically. For instance, I’m not sure this is a good representation of the conjunctive dependencies in this sentence:

[[*They built new seawalls*] [**after** [*the first flood*]] **but** [**before** [*the next one*]]] **as** [*a precaution*].

The problem is that *after the first flood but before the next one* and *as a precaution* both qualify *They built new seawalls* at the same level of hierarchy, while the collocated conjunctions *but* and *before* seem to create a spurious level of hierarchy. No language is perfect and English more so (or less so?) than most.

¹ André Müller & Rachel Weymuth (2017). How Society Shapes Language: Personal Pronouns in the Greater Burma Zone. In *Asia Studies* 71:1, 409-432.

DISCOURSE FEATURES

On one level of meaning, a discourse is a set of utterances generated in a conversation or conversations, loosely based around a topic or set of topics. On another level of meaning a discourse is the range of utterances which can be generated about a particular topical area, and incorporates the particular forms and lexis used in that topical area. The meaning of discourse used here is mostly the first definition.

A discourse can be a single paragraph by a single author, a verbal discussion between two or more people, or a written correspondence with multiple authors. It can be a short exchange or a protracted debate; and it can involve small numbers or large crowds. It is this scalability which makes language so versatile.

Language is a system that is particularly suited to sharing discourse, rather than just sharing simple messages. Seven aspects contribute to this effect.

- **Context** establishes the shared attention which makes the intention to communicate valuable to sender and receiver.
- **Syntax and grammar** generate the processes needed to link messages.
- **Lexis** establishes the mechanisms for the types of linking permitted in a particular language.
- **Subtext** allows non-linguistic features of communication to function in a languagelike way.
- **Genre** creates areas of predetermined content, allowing communicative shortcuts to be established.
- **Interpersonal relationships** create the necessary cooperation to facilitate negotiation toward meaning.
- **Culture and pragmatics** establish the rules of the communication process.