A Transformational Approach to Grammar Pedagogy

Qizhong Chang[1]

Abstract

In this study, a new approach to grammar pedagogy is outlined. A toy version of a transformational/generative grammar is integrated into an English language (EL) curriculum pitched at the level of upper primary school (age 10-12). As far as I know, there has been no formal or coordinated effort in pursuing an approach to teaching EL grammar in Singapore that is based on a structural framework. The current central preoccupation seems to be prescriptive and functional in nature: the student just needs to know what correct and grammatical forms are and how to produce them. This project is therefore innovative by nature. But beyond being innovative, there are at least three pedagogical advantages that are inherent in such an approach:

- *A systematic application of rules/procedures to derive phrasal/clausal structure. The systematicity also ensures that students will be able to analyse grammatical constructions in an unambiguous and consistent manner.*
- *There are inherent links between different constructions in the language (one of the basic tenets of Transformational Grammar – underlying/deep structure). In other words, there is strong coherence in the different modules of grammar in this approach.*
- *There are now principled reasons behind accepting grammatical constructions and rejecting ungrammatical variants. Also, some grammatical facts that previously had to be stipulated now come 'for free' from theory-internal assumptions.*

The central aim behind this innovative research project can be stated thus: to adopt a systematic and structural approach to EL Grammar education.

Keywords: *Grammar, Pedagogy, English Language, Syntax, Structural;*

1. Introduction

Singapore is a Southeast Asian country comprising Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian and various other ethnicities. Despite its ostensibly non-native English-speaking status, Singapore has consistently achieved superlative standards in English language (EL) in both domestic and international assessments. In the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Singapore was ranked first in English [1] (OECD, 2016). This comes as a result of many decades of focus on English proficiency, which is seen as one of the key elements to the small country's access or gateway to international markets. In the English syllabus document published by the Ministry of Education (MOE), the following areas of language learning are highlighted: listening and viewing, reading and viewing, speaking and representing, writing and representing, grammar, and vocabulary [2] (MOE, 2010:13). With regards to grammar, the syllabus document states that there will be "…**systematic** and **explicit** instruction of grammar, with a **focus** on word, phrase and sentence level grammar" (MOE, 2010:8, emphases mine). However, this ostensibly strong focus on grammar remains both prescriptive and functional in nature. A prescriptivist approach means students are simply taught the grammatical forms in the language, while being instructed to avoid certain (common) ungrammatical forms. A functional approach means the ultimate aim of EL education is to produce speakers who can produce grammatical forms and communicate effectively. In fact, the Singapore EL syllabus explicitly brands itself a 'Language Use' syllabus with 'effective communication' as an important aim (MOE, 2010:7). When taken together, we have the unintended result of students being able to produce grammatical EL forms on the surface, yet not necessarily able to understand or explain why or how they do so, other than something along the lines of 'this was what I was taught' or 'the teacher told me so'. Additionally, the above-mentioned seems to be a best-case scenario, since there will definitely be students who are unable to produce the required grammatical forms in the language, much less explain why something is grammatical in the first place. As someone who teaches a grammar class for students who are training to be deployed as teachers in government schools, I can attest anecdotally that the most common student-teacher response to the question 'Why is X (un)grammatical?' goes

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[1] National Institute of Education, Singapore

along the lines of 'I know why it is (un)grammatical but I don't know how to explain it'. And if this is the case for the teachers being sent out to schools, it is natural to expect the same result from the students they teach. Furthermore, when I ask current in-service teachers how they teach certain grammatical constructions, they are unable to provide a straightforward answer ('I don't exactly remember how I covered it'). Alternatively, they will recount different ways of how they teach a certain topic, which goes to show even though Singaporean students can more or less uniformly produce correct and grammatical forms in the language, how they 'get there' can be very different.

To recap, here are some observations on the state of grammar pedagogy and education in Singapore:

> (1) Students (and teachers alike) are largely able to produce grammatical forms while rejecting ungrammatical ones, but are just as likely not able to explain how and why they are so.
> (2) There is considerable variability in how certain topics are taught in schools. This may also be a factor in why weaker students are unable to grasp those topics.

In the next section, I will outline an innovative approach to grammar pedagogy that I argue will address this state of affairs.

2. Proposal

The approach to grammar pedagogy described in this paper borrows heavily from a popular theoretical syntactic framework called Transformational or Generative Grammar, originating mainly from Chomsky's [3] (1957) work. Some core concepts from this framework will be adopted for use here in our approach. These assumptions build an internally consistent system with the following attributes, aimed to address the issues (1-2) described in the previous section:

> (3) Systematicity. The approach needs to be systematic, so that students will be able to analyse grammatical constructions consistently and unambiguously.
> (4) Coherence. The approach needs to allow for connections to be made between different aspects of grammar in the system.
> (5) Reducing Stipulations. With the introduction of certain concepts and principles, we can reduce the number of stipulations required in a traditionally prescriptivist framework.

2.1 Core Concepts and Assumptions

In this section, I will quickly list some important concepts (shown in boldface), before illustrating what they mean with specific examples below. The first assumption in our approach is that all grammatical constructions are related at a certain **underlying** level. This involves the idea that **transformations** are successively applied to one form to derive another distinct form. These transformations will typically involve displacement, or **movement** of grammatical units/constituents to different parts of the sentence. Other transformations include **deletion**/ellipsis of constituents, the **insertion** of constituents, as well as the **substitution** of one constituent with another. Lastly, there are grammatical **features** that are encoded at the word level, which are not always 'visible' but play an important role in the derivation process.

2.2 Example 1 – Relative Clauses

Let us illustrate how our approach explains what a relative clause is and how it is formed. There are several types of relative clauses, but we will start with how an object-relative clause is formed. Take as a starting point a simple declarative sentence:

> (6) The boy ate the apple in the kitchen.

In (6), the subject of the sentence is 'the boy', the object is 'the apple', while 'in the kitchen' is an adverbial of location. To form a relative clause with the grammatical object of the sentence, we will first have to move the object to the sentence-initial position:

> (6a) **The apple**, the boy ate ___ in the kitchen. (Movement)

The underlined segment after the verb 'ate' indicates the initial, or pre-movement position, of the object 'the apple'. By virtue of moving something to the front of the sentence, we are automatically

placing it in focus. This is one of the inherent properties of a relative clause. Next, we will insert an appropriate relative pronoun in between the displaced object and the rest of the sentence:

> (6b) The apple, **which** the boy ate ___ in the kitchen. (Insertion)

Since 'the apple' is an inanimate object, the pronoun 'which' or 'that' is inserted. A relative pronoun needs to be inserted to make (6b) a clause, instead of a sentence as in (6a). The reason for this is so that we can now in turn use (6b) as a grammatical subject of a new independent clause, such as:

> (6c) [The apple which the boy ate in the kitchen] is delicious.

This brings us back to the function of a relative clause, which is to condense the information in an independent clause (6) and be able to use it as a phrase-level unit in a longer sentence (6c).

2.3 Example 2 – Passivisation

Let us now illustrate how our approach explains what a passive construction is and how it is formed. We can continue to use the previous example sentence:

> (9) The boy ate the apple in the garden.

The first step in forming a passive is to move the grammatical subject into an adverbial by-clause:

> (9a) ___ ate the apple [by **the boy**] in the garden. (Movement)

This creates the needed space for the grammatical object to now move into the vacated subject position in the second step:

> (9b) **The apple** ate ___ by the boy in the garden. (Movement)

Before we move on to the next step, let us assume that the verb 'ate' is actually the past tense version of 'eat'. Therefore, we can represent 'ate' as 'eat + -ed'. What we are effectively doing here is separating the past tense grammatical feature '-ed' from the lexical stem 'eat'. We are doing this in preparation of moving only the past tense feature. However, before we do that, we will need to insert a copula verb before the lexical verb. The inserted copula verb is necessary as a host to receive the moved past tense feature (tense features are dependent on other words and cannot stand alone).

> (9c) The apple **BE** eat+**-ed** by the boy in the garden (Insertion)

Next, we move the past tense feature and combine it with the copula verb:

> (9d) The apple **BE+-ed** eat by the boy in the garden (Movement)

The simple past tense form of the copula verb is simply 'was'. Lastly, we will insert the passive suffix '-ed'/'-en' with the lexical verb:

> (9e) The apple **was** eat+**-en** by the boy in the garden (Insertion)

Again, we can understand the function of a passive construction by analysing its formation process. A passive is formed when it is understood that the grammatical object of the initial clause is of more interest than the grammatical subject, therefore the respective movements of the two constituents. The subsequent steps of inserting a copula, and then moving the tense features to be combined with the copula, are important because the original tense of the clause needs to be retained. In fact, a common error in passivisation is to change the tense features of the original clause – for instance:

> (9f) The apple **IS** eaten by the boy in the garden.

(9f) is an incorrect passivisation of (9) because the clause is now in present tense instead of past tense. Lastly, the insertion of passive morphology is crucial in showing that something is a passive construction. This is obvious in our given example ('ate' vs. 'eaten') but other verbs do not show a

distinction between the simple past tense form and the passive form (e.g. 'picked' vs. 'picked') and this is a common source of confusion for students who cannot distinguish between the two. The approach detailed here circumvents this confusion.

3. Application

There are immediate applications for a transformational approach to grammar pedagogy in the Singaporean context – error analysis questions and synthesis questions. An error analysis question involves correctly identifying an error in a construction, defining the error and then explaining the grammar rule behind it. Our approach explicitly lays out the various steps in forming any construction and allows students to pinpoint exactly where any error is found and the basis for the error. A synthesis question provides two independent clauses and prompts the student to combine them in a specific way. The basis of a synthesis question, which requires the students to manipulate grammatical constituents – by moving them around, inserting appropriate words – is largely similar to our transformational approach.

4. Conclusion

The idea that grammar pedagogy can be based on theoretical syntactic concepts is definitely worth exploring, as it can in principle address the two major issues in EL grammar education in Singapore: moving beyond prescriptivism and mere functionality, as well as the variation in how certain topics are taught. The transformational approach described in this paper is a systematic, coherent, principled, as well as innovative way of teaching grammar.

References

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