

Unit 15

Grammar: The rules and regulations of language

Cast:

- Missionary Li Wei
- Teacher Zhang Dong
- 4-5 Students

Scene 15.1. Missionary Li Wei sitting behind a desk piled with grammar texts trying to work out some difficult point of grammar in the target language.

Missionary Li Wei (mumbling to himself): There must be a better way. I've never seen a child studying heavy books of grammar to learn language...

Fade and cut.

Scene 15.2. Teacher Zhang Dong with class of 4-6 students

Teacher Zhang Dong: What is missionary Li Wei doing?

Student #1: Well, he appears to be studying the grammar of the language he's trying to learn.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, that is correct. Does he look like he's having a good time?

Students: No, not really...

Teacher Zhang Dong: Is it important for him to get the grammar of his target language?

Students: (with some uncertainty) yes... I suppose so...

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, you're right. It is important for him to get the grammar right. The real question is: is he going about learning the grammar in the right way, trying to understand it from a text book?

Students: register uncertainty

Teacher Zhang Dong: You're not sure, are you. That makes sense. Traditionally language has often been taught by taking the student step by step through a grammar-based book and drilling into them the things described in the text. Can you think of any problems pertaining to that method?

Student #2: Well, its boring...

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, it can be very, very boring. And if it is boring, it is very hard to sustain interest.

Student #3: When I studied English grammar, there were so many exceptions to the rules that it left me confused. I couldn't get my mind around it.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, grammar can be very confusing, very difficult... So, we have a problem: we need to get our minds around the grammar of our target language, but the way we generally experience learning grammar is boring and difficult. As Missionary Li Wei said, 'there must a better way to learn grammar. As children we learned our own language's grammar perfectly without having to pore through tomes of books...

Cut

Scene 15.2. Teacher Zhang Dong in front of class with a chess board and a car engine in front of him.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Let begin by taking a look at what grammar actually is. The man-in-the-street's view of language is that it is composed of words, of parts of speech. And that is, of course, true. There are such things as nouns, for example. They are the names of people, things, places or animals. Some language divide nouns into concrete and abstract noun. The latter express an abstract quality, e.g. love, beauty, hope, faith, etc. In some languages nouns are always concrete entities which can be detected by the senses.

Verbs are words which express action. Words which fall into the category of verbs play a very different role from those which are nouns. Verbs are the active centers, or action words of the simple sentence. Nouns that accompany the verb of a sentence do so to add meaning and provide context.

There are also descriptive words which help us describe either nouns or pronouns, or verbs.

So, language is made up of pieces which can be identified and described, like nouns, verbs, and descriptive words. However, language is not just a hodgepodge of words. To communicate, you have to put words in the right order. To do so, you unconsciously follow some rules. That set of rules is the language's grammar.

Grammar itself is not communication. Grammar deals with what is allowed, what is possible. These rules need to be understood and properly followed. It's a bit like playing a game of chess: once you know the rules, you can create wonderful, amazing, even unique combinations that are perfectly acceptable.

Another way to think of language is that it is like an engine with a large but limited number of interacting parts. Language has an almost unlimited number of words, true, but a limited number of sounds (consonants and vowels) and a limited number of rules (grammar). Just like there are different types of engines (steam engine, wankel engine, internal combustion engine, jet engine, etc.), there are different types of languages. They hang together differently, but they are all composed of a limited number of parts, operate according to the principles of that engine, and all produce forward propulsion.

In the same way, languages differ in the rules they follow, yet they all produce communication. For example, the rule in some languages (e.g., English) is that the description comes before the item--the yellow bus; whereas in other languages (e.g., Arabic and Spanish) the rule is that the item comes before the description—il bas il asfar in Arabic (the bus the yellow), or la camioneta amarilla (the bus yellow) in Spanish.

Now it is very important to keep in mind that grammar deals with **what** the rules are, not **why** they exist. To ask a language helper why the language operates the way it does is not a productive question. Don't ask "why", but ask "what" and "how" and "when". You only frustrate your language helper or teacher, and reveal their own ignorance about the nature of grammar, when you ask why.

So,

- You need to realize that language has a structure with a limited number of parts. You will master some parts easily, others will be more difficult.
- You need to identify those parts that trouble you in pronunciation and grammar. This entails analysis, and this means that you have to understand how they are put together and how they function.
- You need to drill. Repeated practice lets you gain mastery over the sounds (pronunciation) and rules (grammar). Pronunciation is like tuning your muscles. Grammar is building a skeleton.

One way to identify whether you've mastered a construction is by asking yourself, "What do I tend to avoid because I don't control it yet? What do I still have to construct in my mind before I say it?" A tell-tale indication that you are not yet controlling a particular aspect of the grammar is when you cannot say something directly, so you circumlocute (take a round about way of getting your message across) . Pay attention when you do that and design a way to work on that grammar point. For example:

- Direct Statement: "I wish somebody would have told me about the party last night.
- Circumlocution: "Last night there was a party. No one told me. I'm sad.

Because you haven't yet mastered the difficult construction "I wish somebody would have told me" It took 3 simple sentences to, in essence, say the same thing. So, you need to analyze your grammar from time to time to try to locate your problems. Working on specific problems is the key.

Fade and Cut

Scene 15.3. Teacher Zhang Dong in front of class.

Student #1: Are there any parts of grammar we should concentrate on the most?

Teacher Zhang Dong: You should focus primarily on 4 things:

1. Function
2. Word order
3. Sentence Structure
4. Word transformation and expansion (morphology).

Let's take a look at the important concept of "Function" first. I'm going to give you a worksheet to do that will illustrate the point.

TEACHER ZHANG DONG HANDS OUT PRESENT TENSE WORKSHEET (NOTE THIS WORKSHEET MAY HAVE TO BE REVISED WHEN TRANSLATED INTO CHINESE!)

In English the simple present tense is mainly used to talk about present action in progress at the time of speaking right? Well, let's see if that is, in fact, true or false!

Teacher Zhang Dong has students work on the worksheet, then does it with them, pointing out that the function, i.e., the type of information, determined the fact that these sentences are called the present tense, not the fact that they took place at the time of speaking, as might be expected with the so-called "simple present tense".

	General time	At time Of speaking	Past	Future	No Time	Function
I usually go up to my parent's house	X					Habit/routines
You press the button and then...	X					Instructions
There's a slow train that leaves at 10 AM	X					Public time table, schedule
The earth travels at about 107,000 KM an hour	X					Scientific fact
Margaret lives in London with her husband Henry	X					Permanent situation
Beckham plays it up the line for Barcelona		X				Sport commentary
Canada mourns		X				Newspaper headline
Five skiers die on			X			Past events

mountainside						
Peter tells me....			X			Reporting verbs
That you start your holiday on Saturday				X		Future time clause
There's this man in a pool, and he goes to the top of the board...					X	Jokes
Claire becomes involved in murder					X	Fictional plots

So, as you can see, grammar is a slippery subject: much of the grammatical structures which you think you know, may linguistically not be right!

Let's do another function work sheet. Note that each sentence is used to communicate a different type of information. That's the function. To create that function, different languages use different forms. In example #1, for instance, we can see that, in English, one of the "functions" of the "would" statement followed by the word "but" is to decline an invitation (THIS TOO NEEDS TO BE ADAPTED TO CHINESE)

	Form	Function
1. I would like to go but I have to wash my hair tonight.	"would" statement and then "but"	Declining an invitation, making an excuse
2. Mother to small child: "Can you pick up your toys?"	Question about child's ability to do something	Request, persuading
3. Come in.	Imperative	Invitation to enter house or room
4. Can I PLEASE have the car tonight? I really, really have to go to Jane's party.	Question with "please", emphasis on "really"	Begging, imploring
5. Let's have a picnic on Saturday. We could all bring some food and John could drive us in his car, and ...	Let's...	Making plans
6. If I were you, I would take the TESOL course next semester.	Conditional	Giving advice
7. I will pick you up at the dorm at 7 o'clock.	Future statement	Promise, making plans
8. I'm so sorry about your mother's illness.	"I'm so sorry about..."	Expressing compassion
9. I was the valedictorian for my high school class.	Statement about the past	Displaying accomplishments, braggings
10. Would you like some _____?	Would + like	Offering food, drink

11. What's up?	Question	Greeting
12. I'm sorry. I can't go to the concert on Saturday. Could we go on Sunday instead?	Statement of regret, statement about the situation and a question	Changing plans
13. Did you hear what Susan said about Janet and Don?	Did you hear...	Gossiping
14. Excuse me! I was next in line.	Excuse me + statement	Expressing anger.
15. Do you like to play tennis?	Simple question	Getting acquainted
16. You're welcome	Stock statement	Response to "Thank you"
17. I was sick yesterday and I didn't get my assignment finished. May I turn it in tomorrow?	Statement, result, followed by question.	Making and excuse and asking permission

So, the first thing you need to ask yourself when doing grammar is "what kind of information is being communicated?" Or, in other words, what is the function of this particular grammatical construction?

Fade and Cut

Scene 15.4. Teacher Zhang Dong in front of class

Teacher Zhang Dong: The second thing you should concentrate on when doing grammar work is word order. Take a look at these sentences. (He reveals them one at a time using an overhead projector). Which of the following do you consider to be odd? Why? (THESE NEED TO BE ADAPTED TO CHINESE!)

1. the small brown tables
2. the brown small tables
3. the cheap comfortable chairs
4. the comfortable cheap chairs
5. the large wooden wardrobe
6. the wooden large wardrobe

The answers, of course, are that 2 and 6 would be considered odd, because the adjective word order (descriptive words' order) is unacceptable. However, the adjectives (the descriptive words) in 3 and 4 are interchangeable. It is irrelevant which order they are put in. Here are a few more examples:

1. granite high mountains
2. cotton small black trousers
3. African old woman
4. white big wooden table

5. plastic black shoes

All of these phrases are considered “odd”, right? The “correct” versions would be: high granite mountains/small black cotton trousers/old African woman/ big white wooden table/black plastic shoes

In many cases the choice of word order is personal. Usually, however, the order (IN ENGLISH—ADAPT TO CHINESE) is as follows: size, age, color, nationality and material, unless the speaker wants to emphasize something (those brown small tables--not the white ones).

So, grammar rules determine what order the words will have in a phrase or sentence; i.e., what comes first, what follows what. You are doing grammar work here when you step back and look at the sentence and say specifically **what** is happening and **in what order** it is happening. In doing this, you are not describing **meaning**; you are describing **structure**.

For example (TEACHER ZHANG DONG WRITES ON BOARD)

	Mr. Ming	walked	to town	yesterday	
Label it:	who	what action	where	when	
Say it:	(this is what comes first)	(this comes next)	(this comes next)	(this comes next)	
	Wu	bought	flowers	for his Grandma	this morning.
Label it:	who	what action	what specifically	who for	when
Say it:	(1st)	(next)	(next)	(next)	(next)

So, pay very close attention to word-order in your new language. Compare it with your mother tongue and state the differences that might be there. Note that you are not really doing grammar work by just seeing what is there. You must say what’s happening in the sentence (name it, label it, describe what specifically is going on). Do it in as simple terms as possible.

Using the LAP pictures to lay out the word order on a table can be helpful in helping you visualize it all.

Fade and Cut

Scene 15.5 Things learned in this lesson

- As children we learned our own grammar perfectly without having to memorize grammar books!

- Language is made up of pieces which can be identified and described, like nouns, verbs and descriptive words. The rules which govern how these pieces relate to each other is called grammar.
- Grammar deals with what is allowed. These rules need to be understood and followed properly.
- To ask WHY a language operates the way it does is not a productive question. As “what”, “how”, and “when”, but not “why”.
- A tell-tale indication that you don’t control a particular aspect of the grammar is when you cannot say something directly—when you need several sentences to communicate what a native can put into one sentence
- Function looks at the type of information that is communicated, and how that structures the language uses to communicate that type of information