Grammar and the Influence of Society and Culture

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Introduction: The Language and Culture Interface

Grammar is traditionally viewed as comprising two components—morphology (inflection and word formation) and syntax (a system of rules that describe how all well-formed sentences of a language can be derived from basic elements). Phonetics, phonology, semantics, and pragmatics are commonly treated as separate branches of linguistics. However, for the purposes of various language applications, especially language education, grammar cannot be separated from semantics and pragmatics because it is then stripped of important cultural knowledge about how grammatical structures are used, who uses them and what they mean to native speakers of a language.

The view presented in this article treats grammar as inseparable from semantics and pragmatics. On the basis of existing studies, it demonstrates that it is possible to identify cultural information or meaning embedded in grammatical structures. Before proceeding to the discussion of several case studies, it is important to explain how connections between language and culture are identified.

The idea that culture manifests itself in language can be traced back to the works of Humboldt, Sapir, and Whorf. This idea, initially formulated at the level of a hypothesis, was later supported with empirical evidence based on studies of varied languages and cultures. The development of this perspective in linguistics was facilitated by a close link between linguistics and anthropology.

The most relevant interpretation of "culture" in this regard has been offered by anthropologist Clifford Geertz. In his view, the concept of culture denotes "a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life" (Geertz, 1973, p. 89). Geertz uses a metaphor suggested by Max Weber to explain how an anthropologist can approach the task of studying culture:

> Believing, with Max Weber, that man [*sic*] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning (Geertz, 1973, p. 5).

On this view, part of the linguist's task is to search for and interpret the meanings of such "webs" as they are encoded in language. As rightly suggested by Geertz, a semantic focus of such studies becomes imperative in unravelling cultural variation in language.

Numerous studies in linguistics with a particular focus on meaning show that it is possible to identify connections between language and cultural ideas in the sense formulated by Geertz. In particular, the lexicon is rich with cultural meaning as terms for social categories, values, emotions, speech acts, among others, vary considerably across languages and reflect culture-specific meanings.

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Less widely accepted is the view that grammar is "thick with cultural meaning" (Enfield, 2002a, p. 3). Wierzbicka (1988) notes that the view of grammar as a culturally sensitive construct has been largely ignored in linguistics due to the dominance of formal and asemantic methods of description which are "meaning-blind." Her own conception can be explained as follows:

> Every grammatical construction encodes a certain meaning, which can be revealed and rigorously stated, so that the meaning of different constructions can be compared in a precise and illuminating fashion, both within one language and across language boundaries.
>
> Grammar is not semantically arbitrary. On the contrary, grammatical distinctions are motivated (in the synchronic sense) by semantic distinctions; every grammatical construction is a vehicle of a certain semantic structure; and this is its *raison d'être*, and the criterion determining its range of use. (Wierzbicka,1988, p. 3)
>
> Since the syntactic constructions of a language embody and codify certain language-specific meanings and ways of thinking, the syntax of a language must determine to a considerable extent this language's cognitive profile. (Wierzbicka, 1988, p. 169)

Connections between grammar, culture, and society are studied in an emerging area of linguistics known as Ethnosyntax. The term "ethnosyntax" was coined by Wierzbicka (1979) to introduce a new perspective into grammatical studies with a particular focus on cultural meaning. Two senses of ethnosyntax can be distinguished—a "narrow" and a "broad" one (Enfield, 2002b; Goddard, 2002). Ethnosyntax in a narrow sense aims to locate and articulate cultural understandings that are embedded in the meanings of particular grammatical structures. Ethnosyntax in a broad sense studies how pragmatic and cultural rules affect the use of grammatical structures. Ethnosyntax in this sense is comparable to other studies in the area of pragmatics, such as ethnopragmatics (Goddard, 2002, 2006a, 2006b) and ethnography of speaking.

In the following discussion, I will provide examples of studies in ethnosyntax in its broad and narrow senses. Before proceeding a methodological remark is due. When it comes to identifying cultural themes in language the metalanguage of description is of paramount importance. Since the goal of a cultural analysis is to identify cultural ideas as they are embedded in language, it is crucial to avoid an ethnocentric bias in the analysis. This can be achieved by the use of a language-neutral methodology known as the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM). NSM comprises 65 empirically identified universal meanings (along with a limited number of more complex meanings known as semantic molecules) which combine with each other in certain ways to form a mini-language. This metalanguage lies at the core of every language (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2014). NSM is applied in linguistic studies of semantics of words and grammatical constructions to formulate explications, as well as in studies of cultural and pragmatic factors underlying language use to formulate cultural scripts. Several of the examples provided in this entry represent studies, which rely on the use of NSM as a methodological tool.

Cultural Ideas Reflected in Morphology and Syntax

Morphology

Diminutives are an interesting example of a linguistic phenomenon encoding cultural meaning at the level of morphology. The term "diminutive" refers to a formation of a word that conveys the idea of "smallness" of the object or quality named, generally, in conjunction with an attitude of intimacy or endearment toward it. This phenomenon is found in many languages, but its scope and exact semantic content vary from language to language. Here this variation will be demonstrated using Russian, Columbian Spanish, and Australian English.

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Russian has a highly developed system of expressive derivation. It applies to nouns, adjectives, and adverbs (e.g., *nos* "nose.NOUN.MASC.SG"—*nosik* "nose.DIM," *solnce* "sun.NOUN.NEUT.SG"—*solnyško* "sun.DIM," *krasivyj* "beautiful.ADJ.MASC.SG"—*krasiven'kij* "beautiful.DIM," *bystro* "quickly.ADV"—*bystren'ko* "quickly.DIM"). The system of expressive derivation in personal names is also extremely rich and is largely consistent with the one for nouns. For example, the feminine name *Ljudmila* has the following derivatives (among others): *Ljuda, Ljudočka, Ljudka, Ljudok, Ljudusik, Ljudasik, Ljudaša, Ljusja, Ljus'ka, Ljusik, Ljusenok, Mila, Miločka*, the masculine name *Jurij* has the derivatives *Jura, Juročka, Jurik, Juron'ka, Juranja, Juraša, Jurčik, Jurasja* (among others). Each form conveys a different meaning, and the choice of the form depends on the attitude the speaker wants to express towards the addressee.

Diminutive forms are widely used in speech addressed to children, but they are also commonly used among adults in everyday colloquial speech. The ubiquitous character of diminutive forms in Russian allows Wierzbicka (1992, p. 408) to note that "in Russian speech diminutives seem to be used 'all the time'." Wierzbicka applies a technique of a rigorous semantic analysis to study semantic variation of expressive derivation in Russian personal names. Wierzbicka studies 10 main models of expressive derivation of first names and proposes 10 semantic formulae to capture their meanings (she acknowledges though that the variation is much broader). When identifying an invariant of meaning, she establishes the correlation between meanings of personal names and the system of expressive derivation in nouns. Here I will adduce only two of her examples.

According to Wierzbicka, the most common forms with the suffix *-očka* (*Juročka*, *Ljubočka*) suggest a particularly small size and good feelings associated with small children, not simply children as such. The invariant of meaning of this form can be represented in the form of a semantic explication using NSM (cf. Wierzbicka, 1992, p. 247):

Ljudočka, Juročka
I feel something good towards you
like people feel when they say things to small children

Wierzbicka argues that the suffix *-ik* has boyish associations, in both masculine and feminine forms. Thus, the invariants of meaning are as follows (cf. Wierzbicka, 1992, p. 251):

Jurik, Marik (masculine names)
I feel something good toward you
like people feel toward small boys

Ljusik, Svetik (feminine forms)
I feel something good toward you
I feel something good when I say things to you
I want to say things to you as if you were a small boy, not a girl

Wierzbicka shows that some name forms imply "small children" as a reference point, while others do not. She also shows that some suffixes are gender-specific and have gender reference as part of their meanings. The list of invariants proposed by Wierzbicka (1992) is by no means exhaustive, but it provides guidelines to how expressive forms can be analyzed and compared across languages.

In providing a cultural interpretation of the linguistic elaboration of expressive derivation, Wierzbicka argues that it is reflective of the fact that "intimate personal relations have an extraordinary importance in Russian culture" (Wierzbicka, 1992, p. 408). This elaboration can be related to two important cultural themes of Russian. First, it is reflective of a general cultural value placed on open and spontaneous display of emotions. Second, it relates to the value of displaying affectionate feelings in intimate personal relations. These cultural rules can be formulated in the form of cultural scripts as follows (cf. Gladkova, 2017):

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[many people think like this at many times:]
it is good if other people can know what someone feels

[many people think like this at many times:]
if I know someone well
when I feel something good towards this someone

it is good if this someone can know it

when I say something to this person

[many people think like this at many times:]
if I know someone well
when I say something to this someone

it is good if this someone can know what I feel towards this someone

when I think about this someone

Travis (2004) employs Wierzbicka's approach in analyzing a diminutive suffix *-ito/-ita* in Columbian Spanish. She identifies several uses on the basis of a corpus study and argues that this suffix serves several functions—from its core uses in relation to children to expressing affection, contempt, and hedging speech acts. She concludes that the use of diminutives in Colombian Spanish is based on the prototype of using the diminutive when speaking to children and, therefore, implies feelings of the kind can be felt when speaking to children. A relevant cultural script can be formulated as follows (cf. Travis, 2004, p. 261):

[many people think like this at many times

when they say something about someone:]

when I say this about this someone, I feel something good towards this someone
like people can feel towards a child when they are saying something to this child

She notes that the semantic and pragmatic function of a diminutive in Spanish differs from the one in Russian in that a Spanish prototype of a diminutive is child-focused, while Russian is not.

Goddard and Wierzbicka (2008) identify cultural elements in meanings of the distinctive Australian English diminutive *-ie*. Some examples of such forms are *Chrissy prezzies* (Christmas presents), *barbie* (barbeque), *salties* (salt-water crocodiles), *freshies* (fresh-water crocodiles), *Brissie* (Brisbane), and *Tassie* (Tasmania). Goddard and Wierzbicka argue that the use of this diminutive is different from the use of a "regular" diminutive (e.g., *birdie*, *horsie*) in that it involves abbreviation and it does not convey a "childish effect." The Australian forms reflect a "familiarity" effect (they apply to objects or phenomena well familiar to people in Australia) and the "unimpressed" or "undaunted" attitude that "it is not a big thing" (as a shortened form of the word indicates). Goddard and Wierzbicka (2008, p. 222) propose the following explication for these forms:

barbie, freshies
something
when I say this about it, I think about it like this:

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"it is not something big
when I say something about it, I don't want to say it with a big word
people here don't have to think much about things like this

because they know things like this well"

when I think about it like this, I feel something good

Thus, with the help of a refined methodology of semantic analysis it can be demonstrated that "diminutive" forms in Russian, Columbian Spanish, and Australian English convey cultural attitudes and that these attitudes differ across these languages. Other well-researched examples of culturally salient morphology are honorifics in Japanese (Loveday, 1986; Prideaux, 1970), Korean honorifics and Korean cultural scripts (Yoon, 2004), case in Polish (Wierzbicka, 2008), and reciprocal constructions (Nedjalkov, 2007; Wierzbicka, 2009).

Syntax

As an illustration of how cultural meaning can be conveyed at the level of syntax, we will consider a link between constructions with the verb *let* in English and cultural ideas of "personal autonomy" and "nonimposition" on the basis of Wierzbicka's (2002) study.

On the basis of the existence of a large number of constructions with the verbs *make*, *have*, and *let*, Wierzbicka (1988, 1998, 2002) argues for the cultural salience of the domain of causal relations in modern English. She shows that for each verb it is possible to distinguish several semantic invariants of constructions, all characterized by a slight difference in meaning. On the basis of a detailed semantic analysis, she proposes the following classification of constructions with the verb *let* and formulates a semantic prototype for each of the constructions:

She let him go to the party (*let* of 'permission')
She let him sleep (*let* of 'non-interruption')
She let him cry (*let* of 'apparent indifference')
She let him fall (*let* of 'non-prevention')
Let her be! (*let* of 'tolerance')
Let me know what happened (*let* of 'shared information')
Let me open the door for you (*let* of 'offering to perform a service')
Let's do Z! (*let* of 'suggestion')
Let me conclude by saying … (*let* of 'cooperative dialogue')
Let me talk to him (*let* of cooperative interaction)
Let me think … (*let* of cooperative thinking)

Wierzbicka compares the English constructions with similar constructions in German and Russian, showing that these languages have less semantically diverse causative constructions and that some of the English constructions do not have idiomatic equivalents in either German or Russian.

Wierzbicka puts forward a hypothesis explaining the cultural roots of this elaboration in English:

> […] as democracy developed in a large-scale modern society – first of all, in America […] – a new style of human relations evolved, to accommodate the need for both an increased scale of interpersonal interactions and a new footing on which these interactions were to be conducted […]. The new managerial type of society, too, needed an increased scale of interpersonal causations: for the society to function smoothly and efficiently, lots of people had to be, roughly speaking, told what they were to do. This

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> had to happen, however, in the context of a democracy, where people might be willing to take 'directions' or to follow 'instructions' but not to obey 'orders' or 'commands'. (Wierzbicka, 2002, p. 166)

Other interesting examples of studies exploring cultural attitudes embedded in syntactic structures are Wierzbicka (1992), Goddard (2002), and Gladkova (2015a) on Dative constructions in Russian (e.g., *Mne ne spitsja* "I.DAT no sleep.REF") and the cultural themes of "fate" and "passivity."

Grammatical Structures and Cultural Influence on Their Use

This section provides an illustration of variation in the use of grammatical structures due to the influence of cultural factors. As a case study, we will consider Eades' (1982) research on information-seeking techniques in Australian Aboriginal English in South-East Queensland. She shares her personal experience of collecting linguistic data in the area and reports difficulties she faced in trying to elicit information from Aboriginal people. She notes that commonly Aboriginal people are "confused, dysfluent or noncompliant when questioned by means of an interrogative sentence like *Were you very young?*, the most usual type of question for MCWA [Middle Class White Australian] people" (Eades, 1982, p. 65).

Eades identifies several linguistic models of information sharing techniques in Aboriginal English, among them using a declarative clause with question intonation, "triggering," and the use of interjections and repetitions. She explains "triggering" as "a technique consisting of devices, often followed by silence, intended to lead the knowledgeable person to impart information. In the most common triggering strategy the person desiring substantial information makes a relevant statement, presenting something he already knows about the topic. This is followed often by silence and then by the knowledgeable person talking on that topic, if he desires" (Eades, 1982, p. 76). Interjections and repetitions (e.g., *yeah, mm, oh, what?* and the like) are also commonly used to encourage the speaker to give further information. She notes that direct questions are also used to elicit information, but less frequently than other strategies.

Eades explains the specificity of this practice, as compared to Anglo English, by a prevailing different system of personal relationships, as well as a different cultural attitude to information and knowledge in Australian Aboriginal societies. Socialization among Aboriginal people is strictly regulated by their kin relationships. Eades comments:

> Traditional Aboriginal society […] was and is based on small-scale groups. Each person has a particular kin relationships with every other person with whom he comes into contact – if not a blood relationship, then by extension, a classificatory kinship relationship. These kin relationships play a crucial part in all interaction. […] Clearly, then, the great need to compel interaction between people in MCWA society doesn't exist in traditional Aboriginal society. (Eades, 1982, p. 67)

Regarding cultural rules governing sharing information and knowledge she writes the following:

> In Aboriginal society […] knowledge is not free and easily-acquired good. Knowledge is acquired or passed on as a part of social interaction and is subject to strong controls in many instances. For example, much knowledge of religious and ritual matters is strictly controlled so that only initiated men may know certain songs, stories and places. (Eades, 1982, p. 69)

Other representative studies of cultural specificity at the level of grammatical structures include different grammatical constructions in speech acts, especially requests (Gladkova, 2015a, 2015b),

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constructions involving body parts (Sadow & Peeters, 2021), the grammaticalization of triadic communication in West African languages (Ameka, 2004), among others.

Concluding Remarks

Language is highly sensitive to cultural and societal processes. The grammatically elaborated areas of a language commonly embed meanings or ideas that are particularly salient in the collective psyche of a people. Knowledge of these meanings or ideas can equip cultural outsiders with more effective and successful tools of communication with the representatives of the culture.

This entry has provided some examples of studies illustrating the cultural significance of grammar as it is studied in the field of ethnosyntax. Sociolinguistics is another area of linguistics that investigates similar issues. Sociolinguistics studies how social factors such as social stratification, age, gender, and region affect language use. Sociolinguistics is potentially concerned with all aspects of a language. Grammar falls into the focus of sociolinguistic studies as long as variation in grammatical structures fits the larger question of language variation.

SEE ALSO: Cross-Cultural Pragmatics; Grammar and Discourse; Grammar in Language Teaching and Education; Grammar: Overview; Pragmatics and Culture; Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Applied Linguistics

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Suggested Readings

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