

**Appreciating Linguistics: A typological approach**  
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**Lecture - 33**  
**Introduction to Syntax - Part 1**

Hello everyone, welcome to this session of our NPTEL course Appreciating Linguistics: A typological approach. As of now, what we have discussed and we have understood, is all about words, phrases, and sounds. We discussed what is morphology, morphological typology, then we discussed what is phoneme, what is phonetics, what is phonology and we also moved on to phonological typology briefly. Here, we are to talk about the next section of this course, which is one of the most important ones and it is going to deal with sentence structure of the language. This is the Syntax session of this course. I will start with the basic information related to Syntax and the sentence structure, then I will eventually move over to synthetic typology.

Let us first try to understand what is syntax and why is it important. Why do you think we need to understand sentences? If you remember when I was talking about morphology, my focus was on the words and then the parts of words. I told you this is the most rudimentary element in any given language. We have to figure out if there are many words together and when we speak, we do not speak only words, we try to put them together and that results in sentences.

Just like random ordering of letters will not result in words, random ordering of words will also not result in the sentences. When you are thinking about creating or forming a sentence using multiple words, you have to think about how to order it, what should be the order by which this particular sentence will be called as a sentence, and what do you understand when you utter the word “sentence”. Let us try to understand that first, how the general understanding or a layperson’s understanding of syntax, then we will see how a linguist should understand this.

If you ask me, a layperson’s understanding of a sentence is the combination of words which has a certain meaning or which has a complete meaning, we call it as a sentence. That is how

we all have been taught for these long years of school that we were there. However, when you think about it, do you think you are convinced enough as far as your understanding of morphology and phonology is concerned?

If you remember when I was talking about words or morphology, I said words could be a combination of letters, but sometimes just one letter can also make a word. But in case of syntax, or in case of sentence, we have to test whether a similar kind of a definition can hold true for our understanding of sentences or not. Is it possible that you need to have a set of words all the time or sometimes just one word would be enough to call it a sentence.

So, in this connection, my question for you would be, let us think about it. When I say, I am a teacher, obviously, that has many words, there are 4 words I and am and then a and then teacher. 4 words have been kept in a certain way that it does give us a complete meaning. I am saying I, which is the; obviously, pronoun, if you check it on the basis of the parts of speech that we have; then there is am, which is verb, in this case, this is a copular verb or an auxiliary; then you have a which is an article; and then we have teacher, which is a noun. So, these four components have been kept together one after another, to make it a sentence.

If you rearrange it or if you want to change the order of these words, there is going to be a problem for the sentence. For example you cannot say; let us say I teacher I am a, that is not possible; you cannot say I a teacher I am, no not really. It has to be kept in a certain way to call it a sentence. So, this is how we have been taught sentences prescriptively or in a rule-bound or a rule-governed manner. So, there must be subject, there must be a verb, and if it is a transitive or ditransitive predicate there could be a verb, there could be one object or it could be two objects, depending on the situation we have to arrange the sentences.

Now we will think about, is there any way by which you can have a sentence with just a word. Can you think about it? Is it possible for any given language? Let us start it with English and then we will move over to some other languages that you speak. In English, obviously you can have just one word and you can call it a sentence. Do you think I am right? Just think about it for a while, yes. So, why it should be? I will give you an instance; let say I am teaching here and there is a student who is waiting outside my classroom asking for permission, then she said may I come in. So, when you say may I come in, all that I am

saying yes; I did not say anything else I just say yes. So, when I say yes and there is a full stop.

In this case, this yes, which is just one word can actually be considered as a sentence; because what does it mean when I say yes? I am saying yes, you may come in. So, instead of saying this entire sentence, I have simply said yes; otherwise I can also say come. You have asked my permission may I come in and then I just say come. When you said come, that also is giving information that sometimes only one word can also make a sentence. When you say come, primarily what I am saying, I am saying you come and when you say you come, obviously, there is a subject and there is a verb, it should be a full-fledged sentence.

Just remember if you had this information that sentences are always a set of words, that is actually not correct. Sometimes only one word can also make a sentence. So, that is one way of understanding sentences and then I will give you an instance from back in 1990, which I read in Yule's book. How sometimes we use constructions or we use phrases which do not have or which are not kind of grammatically correct if you follow the rules that you were taught when you were at school.

Here is an instance, as I just mentioned, as quoted in back of 1990 and I got it from Yule's book. There is a letter over here, there is a woman and her husband. She recently went to a public office of a radio station for a mistake that has been done in the message that was meant for her. So, she tried to enquire and then there was a message for there was something written over there. I will just read out the letter as it has been written. So, this is dear Ann Landers, my husband recently ran for public office. He went to the local radio station to record an ad to be read on the air. The copy was written by someone at the station.

So, what was the copy? Let us see. One of the sentences in the copy was me and my family will be moving to this town. That was the sentence. So, if the statement is me and my family will be moving to the town, do you think it is grammatically correct construction or do you think it is okay to speak like that? When I heard it on air, I was shocked. That is what the complainant said. I was shocked how can somebody say me and my family will be moving to this town? Then the husband said, that is the way they wrote it. It did not sound right to me

either; but what to do, the radio people wrote it that way. The statement that the radio people wrote is me and my family will be moving to the town

Neither the husband nor the wife wanted this to be aired. They did not find it grammatically correct. However, it was already written. So, the complainant wrote a letter to Ann Landers and then she said, I immediately went to the station and challenged them. They said you are wrong/ We then telephoned a graduate of Northwestern University who was an English major. He said it could be either I or me.

When an English major student is saying, it could be either I or me, then the question is am I kind of ignoramus? And the kind of diagram or the kind of instances of English grammar that I have studied, obviously, the complainant she was in doubt and then she was trying to break it. She was trying to understand, let us see whether me and my family will be moving to this town, though it sounds to be correct, is it actually structurally correct or is it actually grammatically correct?

Let us find out. What is the subject here in this case This is the letter that I have read. It was written by a complainant to a radio office where the message was aired wrongly; apparently there was a sentence me and my family will be moving to the town, is a construction which the complainant found to be grammatically incorrect. However, when an English major student was consulted, she said, oh it is fine, absolutely fine. It could either be I or it could be me.

Since we are going to discuss syntax in this session; let us parse the sentence which has been challenged by a complainant. Let us see whether this sentence would be grammatically correct or not. When it is me and my family, what is me and my family will be moving to this town? What is the subject here? The subject is me and my family. That is the entire frame with a conjunction. Me as well as my family together is a unit and they will be moving to the town.

If we try me will be moving to the town or my family will be moving to the town, which one do you think is acceptable? Let us try to break sentence one. When I say me and my family will be moving to the town, I will try to break it into two different sentences keeping meaning

the same; me will be moving to the town and my family will be moving to the town. Do you think this sounds correct? Which one is correct, which one is wrong or both are wrong?

Let us think about it, let us give it a try. When you say my family will be moving to the town, absolutely no problem about it. But when you say me will be moving to the town, there lies a problem. You cannot say me will be moving to the town. It sounds a little weird. However, this English major student, she mentioned that at least in an example like me and my family will be moving to the town, that is going to be correct. Now, let us parse it and let us see how it looks when we try to break the sentence.

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1. (Me) and my family will be moving to this town.   
 Me will be moving to this town.   
 My family will be -----

Grammatical      acceptable

2. My friend is a doctor.      4. Columbus green ideas sleep furiously.   
 3. My friend are a doctor.      5. The red bull is sleeping peacefully.

1- Ungrammatical, acceptable   
 2- grammatical, acceptable   
 3- Ungrammatical, unacceptable   
 4- grammatical, unacceptable   
 5- grammatical, acceptable

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Let us look at this sentence. This is what we were talking about, me and my family let us say, will be moving to this town. This is a sentence. The confusion comes from here.

This message has been aired and the complainant feels this is not grammatically correct. She then called the English major student and they were trying to figure out whether you can actually call it a grammatically correct sentence or not.

To her dismay or to her surprise, the English major student from Northwestern University, said that this is fine, it could either be I and my family will be moving to this town or it could be me and my family will be moving to this town. When you get the opinion from an expert,

you kind of think twice to not believe this. When an expert is saying yes, it is correct, then very likely you are going to accept this opinion.

However; the complainant had an idea that every time you have some confusion, let us diagram the sentence and we will find out. Anytime you are in doubt, diagram the sentence. That will give you an idea whether the sentence is correct or not. If we diagram it, one sentence could be me will be moving to this town; this is one, and then the other one should be my family will be moving to this town.

So, in this case, when you say my family will be moving to this town, the sentence seems to be correct; but when you say me will be moving to the town, the sentence does not seem to be correct. No native speaker of English is going to consider me will be moving to the town, as grammatically correct. Then what is the problem here? What should be considered, do you think this is a grammatically correct sentence, acceptable? Do you think the native speakers of English speak like this? There are many questions which are emerging.

We need to understand how we can account for grammaticality and acceptability of a sentence. When you say me and my family are going to the market now; grammatically may not be correct, if you parse it or if you try to diagram it; but this is how the native speakers speak. So, what kind of information do you get from such a construction? A while ago, I told, it is not essential for a sentence to always consist of multiple words, may or may not be.

However, in case of the grammaticality and the acceptability of the sentence, they are two different things. When you say a sentence is grammatical, yet not acceptable, there are many instances. There could be sentences which seem to be ungrammatical, but they are acceptable; and then there are constructions which are ungrammatical-unacceptable and grammatical-acceptable. So, these are the four permutations and combinations that we can figure out.

So, this is the other domain of understanding of syntax; one domain of syntax is just the structure or just trying to put the words in a proper order, so that it can result in a meaningful sentence. So, one is the structure, the other one is the meaning. And when both of them come together, then that results in a good sentence. So, when say good or bad, a good sentence is grammatical-acceptable and a bad sentence is ungrammatical-unacceptable. This is how a

layperson is going to understand. However, in the two domains of grammaticality and acceptability, there is some grey factor also, there are certain grey areas.

Now, let us try to categorize it. You have here grammatical sentences and then you have acceptable. If for the grammatical I am putting a tick, for acceptable I am using double tick. Then we will try to see which sentence is what. I am writing one sentence here, let us say my friend is a doctor; then I will write my friend are a doctor, compare this with this. Then here there is this very famous statement, colorless green ideas sleep furiously. The other one I will say the red bull is sleeping peacefully. Then there is this sentence, me and my family will be moving to this town. So, sentence 1, sentence 2, sentence 3, sentence 4, and sentence 5. In these 5 sentences we will see which one is grammatical, which one is acceptable, which one is ungrammatical yet acceptable, grammatical yet unacceptable, ungrammatical and unacceptable.

Let us check with the first one; me and my family will be moving to this town. We have already discussed this. This seems to be acceptable; but with this word the sentence is ungrammatical. When you have me, then the sentence is ungrammatical. If you write it as I and my family will be moving to this town, then it is fine, then there is absolutely no problem about it. But the moment you put me and my family will be moving to the town, this is ungrammatical; but acceptable. I will put two ticks here, that means, that is acceptable, but ungrammatical..

So, I am writing here; sentence number 1 is ungrammatical, but acceptable; sentence number 2 my friend is a doctor. Do you think it is grammatically correct? Yes? Ok fine. My friend is the subject then there is a verb here, then there is a doctor. There is absolutely no problem about it. My friend is a doctor, is grammatical also acceptable.

Sentence number 3 my friend are a doctor is ungrammatical because there is a problem with the subject-verb agreement, also unacceptable. Sentence number 4, the most famous statement given by Noam Chomsky; colourless green ideas sleep furiously. Do you think it is grammatical? Let us check. What is the subject here? Colorless green ideas. It is a plural subject because ideas is plural. What is the verb? The verb is sleep and furiously is an adjunct, you can call it an adverb also. So, in case of colourless green ideas sleep furiously, I

do not see any reason why it should be considered as an ungrammatical construction; absolutely no problem about it. It is grammatical.

Now let us check the acceptability, do you think people will ever speak a sentence like that, colourless green idea sleep furiously? What do you understand? How can something which is green, can also be colourless? It cannot be, because green itself is a colour and when you say colorless green; that means, it is something like an oxymoron. If you are going to the literature section, that is the different thing, but otherwise when you say colourless green; that does not make any sense. You cannot interpret anything out of it. You cannot draw any meaning out of it. So, if there is something green, it must not be colorless; and if it is colorless, it must not be green. They are contradictory to each other. And these two contradictory elements have been put together or they have come together in a subject, which makes the sentence extremely unacceptable; you just cannot understand anything out of it.

Now let us consider sleep and furiously. If you are sleeping, your action cannot be furious, unless you are kind of sleepwalking. Sleeping is considered to be an action which is done with utmost peace; if you are furious then you cannot sleep and if you are sleeping you can be furious. It is something like colourless green, sleeping and furious, these two phrases are also equally contradictory to each other.

Otherwise, if you look at the sentence colourless green ideas sleep furiously, grammatically you do not find anything wrong about it. That is why this is surely grammatical. Then what is wrong? It cannot be acceptable. Why it cannot be acceptable? Because you do not understand any meaning out of it. And the fifth sentence, the red bull is sleeping peacefully; that is fine. The subject is the red bull and then is sleeping is the predicate. Then there is peacefully, which is an adverb or an adjunct. These are the things we are going to discuss later. So, the fifth one is grammatical as well as acceptable.

Now, let us look at this. These are the patterns that we have had. I think sentence number 1 and sentence number 3 ungrammatical-acceptable; I think sentence number 2 and sentence number 5 if you check the grammaticality and acceptability reference, they are the same. Let us put 2 and 5 in one category because they are both grammatical as well acceptable. Otherwise 1, 3, and 4, each of them belong to different categories. These are the things you



need to understand when you are trying to venture into the domain called syntax or the scientific study or the systematic study of sentence construction, following some descriptive rules.

The dictating of terms for a particular construction following a set of rules would be known as prescriptive grammar or would be known as prescriptive rule-based grammar. However, as far as linguistics as a discipline is concerned, we generally focus on the descriptive grammar. We will get back to it later, but for the moment, let us try to figure out what is ungrammaticality and what is acceptability.

We just realized that not all grammatically correct constructions are acceptable and not all ungrammatical sentences are unacceptable, it does not work in this kind of a clear manner. Anything grammatical is acceptable; anything ungrammatical is unacceptable, that does not work. At least in case of the native speaker's usage of language, you will encounter many instances where you would see the construction would be ungrammatical yet people speak such kind of constructions. The construction will be grammatical, yet it will not be acceptable.

So, these are the different instances which give us an idea that the way we have been taught sentence construction or sentence structures, it needs to be revisited. You need to find out, how you are going to account for all these kinds of ungrammatical-acceptable, grammatical-unacceptable. These kinds of irregularities should be captured in a nice manner

If these irregularities are going to be captured, then the concern here is to find out what is the way out, whether linguistics can help us understand sentence construction better. That is the aim of this domain called syntax. This is just a brief introduction about Syntax and then how we are going to understand the sentence constructions from a different perspective.

Keywords: syntax, sentence structure, grammaticality, acceptability, meaning, subject, verb, adjunct, descriptive grammar, prescriptive grammar