Appreciating Linguistics: A typological approach
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Lecture – 34
Introduction to Syntax-Part 2

Hello everyone, welcome to this session of our NPTEL course Appreciating Linguistics: A typological approach.

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Now, we will go to understand what is the difference between the traditional grammar, which we also call prescriptive grammar and how the modern grammar or the descriptive grammar is different from this.

I am sure all of you must have heard about these terms like noun, pronoun, verb, adverb, adjective; ever since you have started learning English as a language. For most of us English is a second language because in India, English is generally considered as a second language, unless you are coming from a native English speaking family. We have been taught these are the terms which are used to label the grammatical categories of the words in the phrases.

I am giving you an example. Let us say, let me write it here, a beautiful girl. In this kind of a phrase, there are three words. The first one is an article. In traditional grammar or in

prescriptive grammar we call it indefinite article. Then there is beautiful, which is an adjective, and then there is girl, which is a noun. So, these terms like article, adjective and noun, these are used for what? To label the grammatical categories. All these words written here, are grammatical categories. A is a grammatical category, beautiful is a grammatical category and girl is a grammatical category.

The terms like article, adjective and noun, these are the labels which are marked to certain grammatical categories. If you remember, in my initial lectures about history of linguistics or general information of linguistics I said, it started from the Greeks and then the Roman people also started extensively their own language. So, the origin of such kinds of nouns, pronouns, verbs, the origin of this it goes back to the languages like Latin and Greek. Primarily because of the well-established grammatical tradition of Latin and Greek we started following and then it seemed appropriate to adopt the existing categories from these descriptions.

Considering Greek and Latin, these two languages have been studied extensively and they deployed the use of the terms like noun, pronoun or article, adjective to label the grammatical items; the rest of the world's languages started following it without any problem. The analysis of newer languages or the more modern languages like English, Latin and Greek are the classical languages, and a modern language like English also used terms like nouns, pronouns, verbs and adverbs to label their own grammatical items.

That is why the prescriptive tradition of grammar or you can call it traditional grammar, is rich with terminologies. It actually gave a huge list of terms to the grammarians, who were studying it in a more systematic manner. Then, the next thing I would tell you that, when you started learning English as a language, you must be taught that there are things like nouns; and what are the nouns? Nouns are the words used to refer to people, objects, creatures, places, qualities, phenomena and abstract ideas.

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Now, let us understand, I am drawing a line here. We did understand what is grammaticality and acceptability, but before that let us try to figure out how the prescriptive grammar actually understands all these kinds of parts of speech. I just said primarily the origin is from Latin and Greek grammar, these two languages have been studied extensively and then we will start it with phrases like nouns.

Then we have adjectives, then we have articles, I am just jotting down all the parts of speeches that I know and you also know that too. Then the next category is verbs. Further we have adverbs, then we have prepositions and then we have pronouns and then we have conjunctions. These are some basic labels of grammatical items. There are certain grammatical items which we can actually name them like this. These items are generally found crosslinguistically. When I say crosslinguistically; that means, it is available in most of the languages in the world.

Now let us see how the prescriptive grammar or the traditional grammar has helped us to understand nouns and then we will go to check if this understanding has any flaws. If there are flaws what are the means by which we can get rid of it? We can get rid of nouns, but how we can get rid of the flaws or how we can improve the understanding. So, when I ask you the question what is a noun, can you tell me what should be the answer? How have you been taught, when you were studying English for such a long time at school?

Generally how we understand at school, I will ask you to recall what was your understanding, and here I am talking about how generally at the school level, the pupils or the students are taught the definition of a noun. So, generally we understand that, nouns are the words which refer to people, also objects. It also refers to creatures, then places, qualities, phenomena.

Then we have phenomena, plus abstract ideas. These are the different things that the nouns refer to. When I say the nouns refer to people let us say I say boy, a boy is also a person. So, boy is a reference to a person. When I say it refers to the objects, something like backpack, I am carrying a backpack. So, backpack is an object. Creatures let us say a cat, that is also a noun, backpack is a noun, boy is a noun; places bank or school, all are nouns.

Then we have qualities. Let us say kindness. Kindness is a quality or bravery is a quality. These are also nouns. Phenomena and when I say phenomena, earthquake, that is a noun. Also some abstract ideas like love; love is an abstract idea. Let us say hatred, jealousy, these are the abstract ideas. Jealousy, love, hatred, these are the concepts that we can understand, but we cannot really see in its concrete form. So, this is the prescriptive way of explaining or prescriptive way of defining a noun. A prescriptive grammarian is going to say the words which refer to these things, would be called nouns.

Similarly, let us move to the second category. When we say articles, in English, we have only 3 articles, 2 of them are indefinite and 1 is a definite article. The indefinite articles are a and an, and then the definite article is, the. What is the traditional or what is the prescriptive definition of an article?

An article is going to be generally used with the nouns to form noun phrases. So, what is the role of the article? Articles are used to form noun phrases; man, a man; when you compare man versus a man, so man is a noun, a man is a noun phrase. When you have a noun phrase, you would require an article. That is how it must have been taught to you. So, one is a noun phrase, the other one is a noun. Try to understand it clearly, when I say the boy, the is an article, boy is a noun.

When you compare boy with the boy, boy is a noun, the boy is a noun phrase. What exactly made a noun, a noun phrase? That is the use of the article. Here the article is the definite

article, the. So, either it could be a boy, it could be an elephant or it could be the boys; in all the three cases you see that boy and elephant they have been made noun phrases by the use of an article. That is how you understand what an article is.

Now, let us go to the adjectives. I am just giving you a brief idea how the prescriptive grammarians must have taught you at school, especially in the primary and the secondary level, how to understand the articles. And then we are coming to the adjectives. So, what are the adjectives? The adjectives are the ones which provide more information about a noun. When I say a beautiful girl, what is the noun here? The noun is girl, and what is beautiful doing? Beautiful is providing some extra information to the noun. That is why beautiful is an adjective.

When I say a brave soldier, the noun is soldier; and what is brave doing? The word brave is providing some extra information about the noun, which is a soldier; that is where brave will be called as adjective; for example, like happy people, people is the noun and happy is the adjective.

When you say large objects, object is a noun, large would be an adjective. Strange experience, experience is a noun and strange is an adjective. That is how we understand adjectives prescriptively or traditionally. Then the most commonly found word is the verb, and how do we define verbs? These are just various kinds of actions. What do they refer to? They refer to various kinds of actions. It can also refer to various kinds of states; either the states or the actions.

And generally when you talk about action, you generally refer to the words which have some kind of movement or some kind of not exactly movement, some kind of action associated with it. When I say she cannot walk, or she cannot go anywhere; when you say she cannot go anywhere, go is the verb because it refers to an action of going.

When you said she cannot run, obviously, is an action which is also the verb here. But on the other hand, when you say, let us say John is ill. Here, you are not really talking about any action, you are talking about the state of John, the physical state of John. You are saying the physical state of John is ill. There is no action happening here, but it is also talking about the state of the person or the event or the or maybe the object. So, either it is going to be an

action, or it is going to be a state; if the words refer to that, then we call it verbs. I am sure most of you must have understood what a verb is.

Then the next category is the adverbs. Adverbs are very similar to verbs; what adjectives are to the nouns. I hope I made it clear. What adjectives are to the nouns, the same are adverbs to the verbs. What do the adjectives do? The adjectives provide more information about a noun. In case of adverbs, you just replace the noun and put a verb there. So, what does it do? More information about the verb.

When you say the car is running slowly, that means, slowly is the word that is giving us more information about the verb running. What is the verb here? The verb is running, and slowly is providing us or is helping us to understand more about the action. And what is the action? The action is running. That is why slowly would be an adverb. I am sure this is how you must have been taught

Then the next category that we have is, preposition. How do you understand prepositions? These are the words which are used with nouns, providing information about time, place. Let us say, I will reach in an hour; that is about time. Keep the book on the table, that is about the place and other connections; let us say I am going with my friends, you are talking about some other connections out there.

So, these are the informations that you get when you deploy or when you use a preposition. In most of the cases the prepositions provide information related to time, place and other connections. When you say I am standing behind the house, that could be a preposition which indicates the place; but if you say I will reach after you reach, then it is going to be the information about some time. And when you say I cannot do this without you, that is just a connection. So, when you say without or I can do it without a thought. That would be just a connection between or that involves the actions and then the things. So, this is a way by which you understand prepositions.

Now, let us see how have we understood what are the pronouns, which are one of the most important grammatical items in English grammar, for that matter any grammar in the world

or any grammar of any given language. If they have pronouns, how do we understand it? What is the information that we have to find out, what a pronoun is?

So, what are pronouns? Pronouns are generally used in place of nouns. I will give you a few examples. Let us say I saw John yesterday; John was going to market; I asked John to come with me. So, there are three sentences I am writing: I saw John yesterday, second statement or second sentence, John was going to the market; third sentence, I called John to come with me. Instead of saying John, John, John, three times; you can simply use it once and the two other times you can use the pronouns. I can say, I saw John yesterday, he was going to the market and I called him to come with me. So, this he and him these would be pronouns. I am sure this is what your understanding is as far as pronoun is concerned, when you approach it from the prescriptive grammar.

And then comes the last one that I have written in the list, that is conjunction. What are conjunctions? The conjunctions are used to make connections. They also indicate relationships. When you say, let us say my mother was very strict, but she took care of my studies very well. She was strict yet she took care of my studies. This is one way of saying this. The other way you can use another conjunction, my mother is very strict and she always made sure that we perform good in the exam.

When you say my mother is strict and she helped to prepare well in the exam, that means, you are supporting the previous statement. That means, the first and the second they are positively connected with each other. That is why you use the conjunction and. But when you say my mother is very strict, but she made sure we get some fun sometimes, that means, though she is a strict woman, she sometimes actually made it a point that we should have some fun.

So, in the second, when you are using the conjunction, but, the first one and. Then the second one they are not really positively connected. So, the first sentence will have a different connotation and the second sentence will have a different connotation. But no matter whatever might be the connection, and, and but, these are the conjunctions. These are the phrases which have made some connections between one part of the sentence with the other, that is what we call conjunction.

It can also indicate or it does also indicate relationships. When you say, let us say I could not write the exam when I was ill. When you say when I was ill, when is a conjunction which does not just connect; but it also indicates the relationship. What is that relationship? That when I was ill, this was the time I am talking about the time relationship here; that this was the time when my health was not good, that is the reason why I could not write the exam.

Conjunctions could either help you to make connections or it can also indicate relationships. So, these are just a few parts of speeches that have been listed here; how the traditional grammar or the prescriptive grammar has taught you to understand these concepts. What is the most rudimentary way or what is the most basic way, the most basic definitions of this type? These are useful, definitely these are useful, and how these are useful? These are useful to identify most of the forms in a language such as English.

So, in English it is ok, but this kind of a definition may not work crosslinguistically. That is why such kind of definitions may not be completely reliable. If it works for English, does not mean that it will work for an Indian language for that matter. If it works for English it does not mean that it will work for Chinese or for Japanese or for Korean or for Hindi or for Mangla. It may not work. If you try to test these things crosslinguistically, it could be a problem.

However, these are helpful to at least identify the basic forms of it. To begin with, it is a good thing to have it in hand, but it cannot be extended to test its crosslinguistic validity. Why it cannot be tested? It might work for language A, but it may not work for language B. To make it more crosslinguistic, we need to be more inclusive when it will be more broad. Then only we can actually say these are the diagnostics which tell us this is a noun, these are the diagnostics which tell us this is a verb. If we can put them together, then this will come under the domain of descriptive grammar. I hope I made it clear.

Up until now, we have discussed these kinds of parts of speeches and how they are understood traditionally or prescriptively. In the next session we are going to move over to some other concepts, how you are trying to understand it from a from a descriptive point of view, from the crosslinguistic point of view, from a language neutral point of view. You are not really talking about one language, rather you are trying to approach it to understand

human language in general. That will help us to have a better understanding about sentence and sentence constructions. Till then just try to understand or try to remember what all we have discussed to figure out what the different kinds of parts of speeches are.

Thank you.