
Focussing on Promotion in English Sentences to Inform ESL Educational Practice

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Abstract: Given claims of falsification of the Universal Grammar premise, do such claims throw into question the curricula that were built under the influence of, and during the lifetime of, the Universal Grammar premise? Moreover, is urgency for English grammatical research renewal a factor if the influence of that premise was prolific, extending from mid twentieth century through to early twenty-first century? Believing that both answers are likely to be affirmative, and that re-evaluation of English grammar is imperative, this paper takes a step forward in the conceptualization and presentation of grammatical processes that operate universally across English sentences. The ‘step forward’ entails complementary approaches. While a diachronic approach has been taken as appropriate to understanding the historical past, and is reflected in the Literature Review, that approach is not considered to be a source of inspiration mainly because of the argued downfall of a paragon such as Universal Grammar. Rather, a synchronic analytical approach to English has been preferred because it reveals positively original insights which have been hiding in plain sight. The main point to note is the role of the active declarative sentence type as the underlying exemplar from which all other sentence types are generated, through a systematic but non-onerous process being referred to as Focus-Promotion. The main benefit of delving into English judiciously, it is argued, is that the results can inform curricula, native speaker and other fluent teachers and, by extension, can function to be vitally beneficial to assisting ESL student success.

Keywords: ESL Educational Practice, ESL Curriculum Redevelopment, ESL Teaching

1. Introduction

Chomsky put forward a premise that an understanding of grammar occurs autonomously in every individual as an innate endowment realised at birth [1]. The premise became known as Universal Grammar [2], or simply UG. However, Bolinger and Langacker point out that UG is known also as transformational-generative grammar and as transformational grammar [3, 4], and public usage of these names has persisted through time. The Universal Grammar premise was lauded by Hockett as a breakthrough in linguistics [5], and was further supported later by Hauser [6]. However, the emergent UG premise went antithetically against the then currently accepted view represented by Sapir who stated that speech varies “from social group to social group, because it is a purely historical heritage of the group.” [7], p. 4. Sapir later repeated his view, remarking that “Speech is a non-instinctive, acquired, 'cultural' function.” [8], p. 2.

Apart from Sapir’s rejection of UG on cultural grounds,

the Universal Grammar premise went largely uncontested for a considerable time, but was eventually challenged by emerging research into a lesser known language by Everett [9]. Everett claimed to have falsified the UG premise based on his research which demonstrated that UG was not universal because it could not account for a language spoken in the Amazon Basin, a language known as Pirahã [9]. According to Everett, Pirahã shows no signs of linguistic recursion, which is a mandatory requirement of Universal Grammar [9]. Arguing in favour of culturally-determined language, and against UG’s view of autonomous, innate endowment, Everett stated “the case for an autonomous, biologically-determined module of language is seriously weakened.” [9], p. 634. In effect, that was a polite way of claiming that the long-held UG premise had been falsified.

Support for Everett and culturally-determined language [9], can be found in Tomasello who notes that in the study of language acquisition, “there is no evidence that children begin with the abstract linguistic categories characteristic of

most accounts of universal grammar.” [10], p. 641. Tomasello concludes that “when theory and facts conflict, given a large enough body of reliable facts, theory loses, and we must come up with something new”. [10], p. 641. Based on the findings from three disciplines —these being Sapir, Everett and Tomasello, as discussed above— the inescapable conclusion is that a full review of grammar is needed.

In spite of Everett’s falsification claimed on the grounds of recursive-absence in Pirahã [9], support for the UG premise continued in some quarters, though not with regard to recursive-absence. For example, a set of phonological arguments supporting the validity of the UG premise was published by Berent in a cognitive journal [11], and repeated in book form [12]. Unwilling to accept these phonological arguments, Everett responded to their specific phonological arguments, and claimed a full rebuttal [13]. Seemingly stung into action, Everett claimed that the UG premise was falsifiable on phonological grounds [13]. This phonological falsification was in addition to his earlier falsification on recursive-absence grounds [9].

Given the inference arising from Everett’s early falsification [9], and later falsification claim that the Universal Grammar premise is not fit for purpose [13], UG-inspired grammars may be viewed now as *passé* approximations of English, and therefore portray inadequately the nature of English. From this situation, an inexorable – yet important – question arises: are ESL students deserving of educational practice becoming better informed through a release of fresh research that seeks to inform the Academy on syntactical English structure, which is a modest step that can be taken in expectation of increasing ESL student success.

But, is ESL student success really at risk; that is, are ESL students really in need of help? An answer to this question might be able to be gleaned from experiential evidence. It is noticeable that ESL students studying in TESOL courses experience difficulties frequently with a number of sentence types, ranging from conditional to subjunctive to interrogative to emphatic agreement to emphatic negation to passive voice. Clearly, a re-teaching of, say, do-insertion would not remedy most of these difficulties; ergo, a broader explanation would be needed to propel forward lagging student success and confidence. Without trying to deepen any gloom, it must be said that ESL student difficulties have the potential to become limitations, such as those described by Pienemann in ‘Processability theory’ as student plateauing, halting student progress [14].

Overall, it would be timely as well as prudent to ask if there is any positive news. The gloom which may emerged in the discussion above seems to indicate that a narrative-theme is missing in today’s educational practice, be it within either the ESL curriculum or the teaching. While native speakers have autonomously discerned and self-incorporated this narrative-theme, ESL learners have vastly less discernment time in which to excel, and could benefit from a leg up. Therefore, this paper seeks to deliver a theme, around which a narrative can be constructed to showcase the multiple

sentence types that can be formed in English, in a coherent and related manner. Having said this, it is important to not seek voluminous explanations. Rather, the quest is to deliver those same universals of operation that all native speakers once recognised, at a childish age.

2. Methodology

The methodology falls into several discrete steps.

1. The first of these steps is tapping into the literature to identify a critical English structure. Help is at hand because clear identification of the sentence as the paramount construction in English has been made frequently, explicitly by Sapir and Potter [7, 15]; but implicitly by Chomsky and other formal linguists [1]; and used by Greenberg in formulating ‘universals’ that are quite different from discredited UG ‘universals’ [16], but which enabled him to posit that languages throughout the world are typified by three centres of construction placement – these being Subject, followed by Verb, followed by Object (abbreviated to, SVO) for English; but different arrangements pertain, as in an SOV arrangement for Japanese, et al.; and a VSO arrangement as in Arabic, et al.
2. The next step is to identify which of the various sentence types (for example: interrogative, stative, imperative, etc) could serve as a universal model for the creation of all other sentence types. Given Greenberg’s choice of an active-verb declarative as an exemplar for identifying a world language classification model [16], it would seem logical to select similarly the declarative as a possible, but perhaps even probable universal model.
3. The final step in the methodology is intuitive and its purpose is to locate an instance in which English provides a surface clue to its deeper operations. Such a clue is often hidden in plain sight. In extant grammars, there is a propensity to use the label ‘exception’ or ‘quaint’ against some items of grammar but, such is the suspicion caused by the regularity of this labelling, this action would seem to constitute a clue. For example, the alternate positioning of direct and indirect objects is not quaint; rather, it is a clue that could be interpreted as an insight into a controlled and intended process of right-to-left movement. If this premise is true, then it recognises a principle that can be utilised to form all other sentence types. Again using inferences from Greenberg’s methodology as a guide [16], right-to-left movement can be within a placement centre (as for direct and indirect objects within the object centre). However, this paradigm opens the logical and acceptable conclusion that right-to-left movements can occur also between placement centres, as is seen with Passive Voice movement of words from object centre to subject centre.

This premise is not risky because it conforms to a standard expectation in data analysis in which a master theme can

appear in multiple but slightly altered instances. In putting forward the premise, it is not an attempt at sensationalism. Rather, it is a search for the simplicity that must underlie a native speaker's rush to fluency, at a childish age!

Is there indeed such hidden but accessible simplicity in English, or is there an element of phenomenal luck in native speaker's rush to fluency at a childish age? To demonstrate this question of luck versus underlying principle, it is useful to hark back to the past, in order to secure the future, and to enquire whether such a question has been proposed in prior times, and whether it has been answered. Wrenn [17], p. 6-8 did indeed search for what may be described as the 'golden threads' that underpin English. Wrenn's search was unrequited in that he produced broad generalisations rather than specifics, but his failure does not imply necessarily that the 'golden threads' underlying English are non-existent. His willingness to search, generally, validates this paper's willingness to search, specifically.

3. Findings

Clearly, native speaker intuitions are inaccessible to adults because the intuitions have become deeply embedded and thus act in adults as automatic, but unanalysable, responses. Due to this limitation, this paper's approach is to interpret and then investigate clues in the literature (as well as clues from formal teaching experiences). In this regard, the clues point towards a theme of controlled movement, which makes sense in a situation of sentences being altered. For example, could there be a clue visible in the controlled movement of an auxiliary verb to precede its nominal in anticipation of delivering an interrogative? Furthermore, could another clue be visible in the dramatic yet controlled movement seen in a passive voice construction?

3.1. Promoting One of Two Objects

As a beginning to prove the premise for the existence of controlled movement, consider the relatively simple movement that is permitted in an object centre in which two nominal objects are expressed. For example:

She gave money to my father.

She gave my father money.

Intuition suggests that a right-to-left movement functions to increase the amount of focus that the indirect object would receive in its modified position. With that increase in focus as a benefit, the term Focus-Promotion would be a descriptive theme name for the movement. This nomenclature, simple in itself and easily understood, derives from league tables.

Because an intra-centre movement theme has been discussed as possible, it would be remiss to not entertain an inter-centre example. Furthermore, could an extreme inter-centre movement, say from the object centre periphery to the subject centre periphery as seen in a passive voice construction, be explained by a focus-promotion theme? Certainly an enhancement in focus occurs in such a promotion, and this is particularly visible when the object-

centre contents are suppressed (as in, 'I was shot'). Therefore, let's proceed to further focus-promotion explanations.

3.2. Promoting a Question Focus

The following several subsections deal with the promotion of auxiliary verbs into focus position, beginning with an example using a modal auxiliary verb.

3.2.1. Using Auxiliary 'Did' in a Question

She kicked my dog.

She did kick my dog.

It can be taken as given that auxiliary 'did' can be hidden within a declarative. For instance, it is clear that although the first example above has an unsophisticated verb centre made up of a single verb, it is largely equivalent to the second example in which the verb centre has grown in sophistication. Apart from the verb centre's increased size, the inclusion of 'did' is acknowledged as functioning to carry greater emphasis.

Did she kick my dog? Really?

In order to create a question from the previous example, the now-visible modal auxiliary moves in accordance with the focus-promotion theme discussed above; that is, in a right-to-left direction and, leaving the verb centre, it repositions itself at the sentence's forefront beyond the nominal, establishing a new focus.

She kicked my dog, did she?

Not to be forgotten, there is of course an alternative way of forming a question, and this can be done by repeating the declarative as well as appending a suffix. Under some circumstances, the following utterance would be deemed appropriate: 'She did kick my dog, did she?' Inclusion of these appended suffix examples are for completeness but, in future, non-inclusion will be favoured in order to concentrate efforts on right-to-left movements.

3.2.2. Using Auxiliary 'have' in a Question

My twin sisters have just painted their nails an azure colour.

Have your twin sisters ever painted their nails an umber colour?

Shown in the first example above, is a typical SVO pattern where the focus is on 'sisters' who are delivering an action to their fingernails. However, in the second example, there is an interruption to the typical SVO pattern. Akin to a previous example, the interruption is intended to alert the listener to a changed pattern. The auxiliary ('have') can be seen to have departed from its verb slot alongside 'painted', and is now promoted to become the sentence's focus.

My rather trendy sisters have repainted them.

**My rather trendy have sisters repainted them?*

Care must be taken to not think of the promotion mechanism as a kind of inversion, because inversion suggests instances of minimal promotion, and minimal promotion can yield some unacceptable situations, which are shown as * in the above example of inversion.

They have repainted their nails.

Have they repainted their nails yet again?

It is true, of course, that minimalistic promotion does occur when pronominal forms are in use, but this remains standard focus-promotion, not inversion.

3.2.3. Summary on the Role of Single Auxiliaries

After considering two types of auxiliary, it seems both reasonable and defensible to claim that the promotion of other auxiliaries (such as ‘would, could’) is the standard mechanism to convert declaratives into interrogatives, with one proviso; namely that, while its validity is guaranteed with single word auxiliaries, its validity is less guaranteed with two word auxiliaries, as discussed below.

3.2.4. Using Two-word Auxiliaries in a Sentence

Have I to go?

**Have to I go?*

Consider the promotion mechanism for a two-word auxiliary, ‘have to’, which is equivalent in meaning to ‘must’. Should both auxiliary words be promoted, or just the first and most prominent one? Deliberations to date would require us to conclude that there is likely a preference for single word promotion.

Ought I to leave now?

**Ought to I leave now?*

Here is a further case, again supporting a case for single word promotion.

3.2.5. Using Two Independent Auxiliaries in a Sentence

My nephew could have translated the essay into Mandarin for you.

Could my nephew have translated the essay into Mandarin for you?

It probably goes without saying that when a declarative comprises of two auxiliaries (such as ‘could’ and ‘have’), promotion occurs to a single auxiliary – this being the left-most, as shown above.

3.2.6. A Twist in the Movement Tale

Having described promotion into the focus area, while ascribing that movement to a single purpose (viz. interrogation construction as has been demonstrated so far), could create an impression of limited functionality of the movement mechanism. But that is scarcely true. To have faith in the flexibility of English, is surely to expect that English would be able to deploy the same promotion mechanism with at least one other part of speech. And who would gainsay an answer of emphatic negation, or emphatic emphasis?

3.3. Promoting an Emphatic Negation Focus

I have never taken a bribe.

Never have I taken a bribe.

Emphatic negation is an instance of deploying two words to the focus-promotion position. This time, however much it

may emulate an interrogation format, the engineered sentence is not a question, but the restructured utterance is an emphatic denial. The mechanics involve two promotions – firstly, a ‘have’ promotion alerts us to a new but under-construction focus, with its completion signalled by the emphatic negation ‘never’ promotion and its arrival in the focus spot.

Seldom should one be indulgent, but it would be appropriate to add that emphatic negation might be a relatively low usage feature of English, but it is difficult to countenance that it would ever be lost to speakers and writers of English, due to its very attention-getting denial.

3.4. Promoting an Emphatic Agreement Focus

You, madam, are truly ostentatious! I am, too!

You, sir, are truly ostentatious! As am I (So am I) in my mannerisms.

Because English allows emphatic negation to become a focus, you will not be surprised to realise that emphatic agreement is another two-word instance of focus-promotion. The ‘madam’ example uses no emphatic agreement focus. However, the ‘sir’ example does, and in fact, it operates in the same way in which ‘never’ occurred first in the earlier negation example – similar operation has been seen also in interrogative construction examples. Although emphatic agreement follows the mechanism that we have been tracing for some time, it might have been an overzealous statement to describe it as ‘emphatic’. Agreement does not seem to rise to the heights of negation, in the manner in which ‘never’ and ‘seldom’ do.

3.5. Promoting Extreme Foci

There are several instances of focus-promotions that could be considered extreme, namely, Imperatives, Passive Voice and Subjunctive Mood.

3.5.1. Using an Imperative Focus in a Sentence

You must secure your seatbelts and hang on to your hats.

Secure your seatbelts and hang on to your hats!

The example sentences above both make a demand on a listener. However, the latter imperative sentence carries a greater urgency than the declarative shown. But, surely, your question must be: What has imperative got in common with the focus-promotion mechanism? The mechanism is to promote right-to-left through a deletion of all words from the subject centre, which, at first sight, appears to be extreme. Secondly, the mechanism sacrifices the auxiliary ‘must’ from the verb centre. Once these deletions have occurred, the verb finds itself promoted into the sentence’s focus position.

3.5.2. Using a Passive Voice Focus in a Sentence

They gave me a good talking to.

I was given a good talking to.

To the unfocused eye, passive voice might seem to be an

everyday event, and lacking in special appeal. However, it does represent another extreme form of focus building. It is extreme because it deletes all words from the subject centre, in order to promote elements from the object centre. The promoted words then become both the subject and, at the same time, the new focus. This scenario is shown in the above examples.

As you would notice, the verb centre does not remain unaffected because a change is made to the verb, increasing verb centre sophistication. The sentence itself may be described as 'passive' (perhaps because it was the receiver of an action delivered by 'they'), but the promoted subject is anything but passive since it now sits in the focus position, which does not imply passivity!

My mother should have been told a lot earlier.

Should my mother have been told a lot earlier?

Interestingly but not unexpectedly, an interrogation promotion can occur against a passive voice construction in the same elegant manner as it does against declarative constructions. Apart from indicating coherency, this second movement also indicates that the underlying promotion processes, governed by English, indicate a controlled and rational approach; perhaps even approaching simplicity. Such an underlying simplicity might be conjectured as necessary to assist the attainment of native-speaker language fluency in children.

3.5.3. Using a Subjunctive Mood Focus in a Sentence

If I were you, I would reconsider my options for travel abroad.

Were I you, I would reconsider my options for travel abroad.

The first sentence is conditional because it presents a condition ('If I were you'), which must be satisfied in order for the action in the later part of the sentence to be fulfilled. In the second example sentence, the verb 'were' is promoted to become the focus, displacing conditional 'if' but retaining meaning with one fewer word while providing an alternative utterance style.

4. Conclusion

This paper followed a non-overt implication that was detected during a close reading of Greenberg's paper on universals in language, namely that the declarative sentence could be the paradigm upon which all other English sentences are constructed. It was then demonstrated carefully that the construction of alternative sentences from a known base can be achieved, in a relatively easy manner, through a mechanism that has been described above as focus-promotion, whereby a controlled movement (the promotion) is made in relocating a word to a highly-visible and predictable (the focus) position. Believing the focus position to be a sentence's prime position, it was then claimed that listener attention would be alerted to a change in sentence usage.

To prove the point, an exemplification of the mechanism was presented for producing a range of sentence types, including not only interrogative focus, but also emphatic negation focus, emphatic agreement focus, passive voice focus as well as imperative focus and subjunctive mood focus sentences. These examples supported this paper's premise that just a single movement mechanism is operational in English, but which functions to create a range of sentences, each with a different focus to attract listener attention away from the underlying declarative sentence type. Thus, the mechanism could be claimed to be universal to all English sentences.

This paper could benefit TESOL teachers, as well as English speakers, in achieving a coherent understanding of the focus-promotion mechanism. Clear identification of the underlying mechanism means that English speakers now have a holistic and unified concept of how English works at the sentence level – it is logical and reusability-friendly and, as can be implied from the reusability discovery, even frugal. If we were to evaluate our findings against past but convoluted grammar explanations such as the now discredited premise of Universal Grammar, we would be obliged to conclude that English sentences are no longer (and never have been) a disjointed list of disconnected types. In a careful perusal of this topic's premise, procedures were identified which re-create each sentence type out of the basic declarative sentence type, thereby building a universal bridge between sentence types, and thenceforth exposing the elegance of English as a side issue.

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