
Focussing on Building up ESL Perception of Verb Slot Complexity to Inform Educational Practice

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Abstract: Focussing on the ESL student perspective, this paper develops a systematic and holistic, yet nevertheless clear, explication of managing sophistication in the Verbal slot. The inference is that such clarity is missing in extant grammatical treatises on ESL Verbal slot construction. Holistic is defined as a presentation not merely of the structures, but rather one which attempts to communicate the ethos of English, thereby allowing adult ESL students to more readily find answers to the anomalies which an incomplete understanding brings to those learners of English. The proposition is that a full appreciation of the Verbal slot is best achieved in two stages. The first stage is to inform students on the variety of patterns that will be encountered in a Verbal slot. This is done by using exemplar patterns, but restricted to a single sentence type – the declarative type. These declaratives display rising degrees of Verbal slot sophistication with the objective of raising ESL student familiarisation and comfort with manipulating Verbal slots. The second stage to fluency, which is detailed elsewhere, requires students to employ their Verbal slot familiarity in order to transform declaratives to the range of other utterance types, such as passive voice, subjunctive mood, interrogative, conditional, emphatic agreement, emphatic negation, and statives as well as imperative. Sentence transformations, it needs be said, present ESL speakers with a new set of difficulties largely because the transformation process moves beyond the Verbal slot to include the Subject slot, and although less frequently but more radically, transformation can include the Object slot.

Keywords: ESL Educational Practice, ESL Curriculum Redevelopment, ESL Teaching, Second Language Acquisition

1. Introduction

When treating English grammar, one question always arises, namely, is any particular structure more important than others? In answer, two preferences have been expressed. Whereas linguists have been inclined to divide their foci onto both clauses and sentences [1-4], in earlier times grammarians took a stance, consistent over time, that uniquely favours the sentence as the most important structure [5-7]. While there is some contention between these two views, Greenberg has offered an answer that seems to resolve the contention [5]. The answer appears in the methodology that Greenberg used to classify world languages into three main types. His methodology indicates the sentence is a reliable structure, especially the declarative sentence. Greenberg found that languages such as Japanese strongly favoured presenting their actors before their verb in a Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) declarative structure; while languages such as Arabic strongly favoured presenting their

verb before their actors in a Verb-Subject-Object (VSO) structure; whereas English placement divides the actor slots from the central verb slot, giving SVO [5].

It follows, from the Greenberg classification, that ESL speakers from languages other than the SVO categorisation will need to straddle their production of the actors' slots across the verb slot. Such a challenge is indeed surmountable; however, it does bring into focus the need (and the opportunity) to carefully parse up the three slots for student edification. While the need to parse might be considered a universal trait, at this time, a question arises nevertheless, namely, are each of the three slots equal in difficulty?

Answering for English only, it would seem reasonable to propose that the verb slot outranks the actor slots. The initial reasoning being that English has a spread of verb types, ranging from the morphologically simple so-called weak verbs; through to the morphologically more random so-called strong verbs which are limited in number, but despite being a

closed set, they are nevertheless used frequently; through to the morphologically extended phrasal verbs where one or more prepositions coalesce freely with either a strong or a weak verb form.

While the skills needed to manage these verb sets is more than the tip of the proverbial iceberg, further challenges exist with managing auxiliary verbs, which function in conjunction with verbs in the verb slot. There are two main auxiliary verb groupings that need careful parsing and presentation. The first is a small but powerful grouping – namely ‘have’ and ‘had’ – which might be defined as representing the relevance, or non relevance, of an action (to a listener) at the time of an utterance.

The second auxiliary verb grouping concerns modal auxiliaries, and to some extent, this paper would claim that they have lived a chequered life. It is described as chequered because grammatical descriptions of modals may have restricted, however unintentionally, the success of ESL students. For example, publications have long claimed that modal “would” is the past tense of “will” [8], p. 193. In consequence of this advice given by linguists, students who currently attend TESOL (Teaching English as a Second or Other Language) centres are often seen to parse up ‘would’ as an action that has occurred in reality, and thus remaining oblivious to, and putting themselves at odds with, the irrealis intention that has been expressed in the utterance. Without a correct understanding, students might be expected to fare in a similarly uninformed manner with other modals, whether those modals appear as a single, or a two word, form.

But, is this a case of just one swallow not the summer maketh, or is this a case that may be truly indicative of lethargy in informing correctly the ESL student body? While it is not a circumstance that would be desirable, there is a potentially dark cloud overhanging the achievement of successfully informing ESL learning outcomes. That cloud is the status of the Universal Grammar premise (UG) [9, 10], which is a premise that has been in sustained demand for over half a century, with its popularity beginning in the mid twentieth century.

In that century, there was a fascination with the concept of universality. Early in that time, the fascination was evidenced with universal suffrage demands, where ‘universal’ was meant to indicate the struggle of women in their quest to secure voting rights, thereby achieving a universal equality for women throughout the world. However, in spite of repeated efforts, even today it can be said that suffrage for women is anything but universally available, with notable areas of omission. In other words, the reality of universality fell short of the hope for universality.

In a further use of the term ‘universal’, Greenberg proposed that principles that were operating at a syntactic level could be described as universal principles [5]. However, while the term ‘universal’ carries an aura of categorical certainty, Greenberg was prudent in frequently attaching the words “almost always is” to his linguistic rule sets [5]. Akin to universal suffrage expectations, there is a shortfall in reaching the universal target, and this suggests again that the

term ‘universal’ may host enthusiasm for change, but that it also hosts hyperbole.

Perhaps the best known use of the term ‘universal’ came with the emergence of the eponymously named Universal Grammar (UG) premise [9, 10] in which ‘universal’ was intended to imply that an ability to produce language was a skill granted at birth, and available effortlessly, to all peoples throughout the world. The inference from the UG premise is that an expectation exists that there would be a mandatory universality among languages. Needless to say, this expectation was not negotiable. One example of this non-negotiable universal requirement involves languages being obliged to have complex numbering systems. However, as fateful to UG as it seems, the Warlpiri language in Australia could not be said to have an extensive numbering system [11], and this numeric feature extends to Warlpiri’s family grouping, namely, Pama-Nungan [12]. Foster explains that in the absence of a large range of numbering [11], cultural signing techniques exist for description. In addition to these languages, nor could the South American Pirahã language be said to have an extensive numbering system [13]. Absences in these languages seem to indicate another example of the term ‘universal’ hosting hyperbole, this time by the UG premise. But one swallow does not a summer make, so perhaps UG could be trusted to be a reliable informant of ESL pedagogy if it be but a single excess of hyperbole.

However, the news for the UG premise is not promising. Another mandatory requirement of UG is that languages show recursion, which is seen in situations in which a clause is inserted into a sentence, such as is the case of inserting a relative clause into a sentence. In this regard, the Pirahã language is said to be unable to produce relative clause, or recursion as it is called, into a sentence [13]. This absence underlines again a linkage between hyperbole and the non-universality of UG. So, the question must be put again, ‘Could UG be trusted to be a reliable informant of ESL pedagogy if it be but a dual excess of hyperbole?’

In a rearguard action, and intending to defend UG against Everett’s research-driven claims [13], phonological mindset arguments purporting the validity of the UG premise were published, both in a cognitive journal [14], and repeated in book form [15]. In reality, Berent’s papers reverted to a long-standing debate about the existence of a universal ‘phonological mind’ which is also referred to as ‘grammatical nativism’. In a response paper, Everett claimed a full rebuttal of all phonological mindset arguments supporting UG [16]. Everett’s reason for rejection is that the ‘phonological mind’ hypothesis made claims which were not sustainable, because there was a failure to offer convincing supporting evidence [16]. Apart from Everett’s research, support in favour of culturally-determined language, and therefore against UG premises, 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 [which are] characteristic of most accounts of universal grammar” [17], p. 641. For a third time, the question must be put, ‘Could UG be trusted to be a reliable informant of ESL

pedagogy if UG be now shown to be a treble excess of hyperbole?'

Almost as a postscript, but given the sustained weight of research produced by Everett disputing the universality of UG, it is notable that although the mid-century emergence of UG as a premise, advocating effortless availability of language at birth, UG did not disprove, but instead popularly displaced, the then long held tenet that language was an artefact generated within a community, as expounded by Sapir [18, 19].

In summary, this review has brought into focus the need, and the opportunity, to carefully parse up the verbal slot, as the slot most likely to enhance ESL student edification through better informed pedagogy. In Tomasello's words: "when theory and facts conflict, given a large enough body of reliable facts, theory loses, and we must come up with something new" [17], p. 641. The inescapable conclusion is that a review of grammar is justified.

This paper presents, in an organised manner, a representative range of exemplar patterns each of which would be encountered by any student on a journey into full English fluency. Emphasis is placed on an understanding of the multiple patterns of construction that can occur in the verbal slot of English sentences, and therefore includes not only verb forms but includes also a treatment of the major auxiliaries such as modals. So as not to overawe students, exemplar sentences are restricted mainly to a declarative format but some exemplars include also a stative format.

The longer-term implication intended to be conveyed by this paper is that full familiarisation with declarative patterns encountered in the verbal slot will be a large determinant of whether students will be able to transform, with a degree of fluency tending towards native usage, a declarative pattern into the range of target sentence types that are used in English [20]. This range includes passive voice, subjunctive mood, interrogative, conditional, emphatic agreement, emphatic negation, stative as well as imperative. Although it needs not be said to a native speaker, transformation has its own set of difficulties largely because the transformation process moves beyond the verbal slot to include the subject slot, and although less frequently but more radically, transformation can include the object slot.

Meaning no criticism of the teaching practice, it is helpful to dwell briefly on a simple interaction in which an English-under-construction ESL student seeks an explanation of verbal slot grammar points from a native speaker, or any fluent speaker of English, teacher. Against time constraints, almost inevitably, a teacher must revert to providing a bottom-up explanation. Bottom-up is used here to imply an explanation that is limited to one specific feature in the verbal slot, but is not necessarily generalizable elsewhere. In cases where this happens, the teacher's bottom-up explanation is akin to a demand for the student to undertake rote learning on that particular point.

The thesis of this paper is that a holistic approach has a greater probability of providing learners with tools appropriate to arriving at a working appreciation of the ethos

of English verbal structures. Although rationales were established in the previous section for the need and the opportunity of informative input into pedagogy and teaching, a further rationale remains to be stated. If mastery of the verbal slot was critical for native speaker English language fluency, by analogy would it be less true to entertain the idea that similar mastery of the verbal slot is crucial for ESL student fluency, and is similarly crucial to avoid ESL students reaching but never advancing beyond a plateau of limited fluency [21], rather than attaining higher fluency?

2. Methodology

In approach, the methodology of this paper is to proceed from the most simple verbal structures in English, such as an habitual action construction, to the more complex structures, such as passive voice construction. That is done by presenting a series of carefully gradated exemplar examples of English sentence constructions, the merits of which are discussed in commentary which accompanies each exemplar. The exemplar examples are organised into seven short sections, based around the English tense concept, beginning with simple present tense uninflected examples, but culminating in later sections in which more complexity is demonstrated through the presentation of past perfect inflected examples. Although rising complexity is seen between sections, there can be rising complexity also within sections. Rising complexity is evidenced by a widening and thus a more sophisticated verbal slot, just as narrowing of the verbal slot usually evidences falling sophistication.

3. Findings and Discussions

3.1. Managing Uninflected Stems

Habitual action, as shown in the first of the examples below, represents a case of minimal use of the verbal slot.

On Saturdays, I attend our district's early morning netball match. (Editor: please note one instance of underline)

It is minimal occupation of the verbal slot for two reasons. First, there is no inclusion of an auxiliary verb, such as 'have', to accompany the main verb. Also, the main verb (which is underlined in the example) shows no inflection, existing merely as a stem that represents a construction conveying habitual action. That action, while it is not happening at the time of the utterance, is taken to have occurred in time now past and is expected to continue with similar regularity into future time.

When the verbal slot is widened slightly, thus ceasing to be minimal, and an uninflected stem is maintained, it is no longer guaranteed that habitual action be deemed. Such a case is shown in the following example.

I must attend on time next week because there are finals. I do intend to be on time into the future.

The inclusion of a modal to precede the verb, as underlined in the first sentence above, means that a future action of arriving on time is wished-for but not yet completed

as an habitual action. The inclusion changes the mood of the sentence, and is typically called 'irrealis' which might be explained as action that is, as yet, unreal in its completion and could be blocked from happening by future circumstances.

As a further comment on modals and their contribution to changing mood, it is noteworthy that they need not be represented by a single word. Such a case is demonstrated in the following example, which features a two-word modal.

I ought to attend on time next week because my mother will be refereeing one of the finals.

While the verb remains uninflected, the modal does expand verbal width in visual terms because it comprises of two words. However, as regards its irrealis function, it is deemed to be a unit expressing a feeling of obligation to undertake the action expressed in the verb. While the reception of two-word modals needs to be recognised, ESL speakers may favour production of 'should' as an equivalent but simpler form. Of course, a choice to produce both forms would enhance a speaker's expressive variety.

Although stress can be indicated through voice modulation, there is also a mechanism to achieve the same ends. Such a case is demonstrated in the following habitual example.

While I do plan to attend afternoon matches next season, I do not attend them now.

Inclusion of 'do' into the verbal slot is a mechanism to express emphasis. 'Do' is latent in some English sentences, but since most utterances have no need of stress, it remains hidden. However, its invisibility should not be taken to mean it is unavailable. In fact, its presence is a mandatory inclusion when expressing negation in a habitual sentence, as shown.

Continuing the theme of an uninflected stem, the following example explores future 'tense' action expressed in two ways.

I will learn a lot by watching as frequently as I do. I hope for some luck.

Future action is being signalled by the insertion of modal 'will' before the uninflected verb 'learn'. Sometimes, a verb's semantic characteristics function to infer future irrealis action, removing the need for modal inclusion. Such a verb is 'hope'.

3.2. Interpreting Inflected Stems

Apart from the inflectional suffix '-ing' to indicate continuity of verbal action, inflected verbal stems are typically described as 'past tense'. This paper suggests that a slightly different definition could be of greater benefit to students than the current 'past tense' nomenclature. The suggested definition is that any verb, when so inflected, will carry a sense of completed action, but this sense of completed action must be interpreted according to the absence, or the presence, of subtle inclusions in the verbal slot. The derived interpretation will determine whether the completed action is imputed to occur in the future, rather than the sometimes-held assumption that any mention of completed action must be indicative per se of past

completion; and secondly, whether the action took place in reality or was imagined.

I took the axe and smashed a chair, then I took off.

The above example demonstrates the absence of subtle inclusions, and in current nomenclature would be called 'simple past tense'. Although it is referred to as simple, ESL students still need to notice the absence of subtle inclusions such as a modal (would) and time-relevance (have). Additionally, student attention could be deflected by the need to navigate the various forms of any strong verb being encountered.

Strong verbs are defined as verbs that are not conformant to a single paradigm for 'past tense'. Mitchell reflects on this when stating that strong verbs have been derived from multiple class types that existed in former times [22], before Modern English was evolved. The forms of 'run, ran, run' and 'find, found, found' are typical samples of the paradigm quandary facing an ESL student.

While strong verbs are known to be small in number, they are more frequent in usage. Therefore, a student would be ill-advised to be hoping to encounter sentences with only weak verb constructions. Adding to this navigation challenge, ESL students encounter a seemingly identical form of 'took' and, later in the utterance, must recognise a phrasal verb construction 'took off', which is based on a strong verb paired to a preposition. This is in fact a third verb type.

The sight of weak verb 'smashed', also known as a regular verb, is a much lighter moment for students because the vast majority of English verbs have become regularised to contain '-ed' as the marker of all completed action.

3.3. Including Auxiliary Have

While continuing to build on the previously discussed construction, the inclusion of auxiliary verb 'have' into the verbal slot signals not only widening, but signals also a rise in sophistication. Sophistication here means a sentence is able to convey more complex meaning.

The following example portrays a rise in verbal sophistication when auxiliary verb 'have' is introduced, as an antecedent to the main verb, to represent the situation that a relevance to time now exists as part of the sentence's semantic package.

Jo, I have taken your garage keys, to garage my car.

There are two noticeable points of interest that arise from the insertion of auxiliary verb 'have' as an antecedent to the main verb. Perhaps not immediately obvious to an ESL speaker is the juxtapositioning of an uninflected verb form 'have' adjacent to an inflected form 'taken'. Perhaps less obvious to a learner is the idea that 'have' serves to reflect a relationship of relevance to the present moment.

While 'taken' indicates a completed action, the injection of 'have' remodels the construction by implying that a temporal relationship exists to the present moment; that is, the time when the speaker uttered this sentence. In other words, there is a subtle present-time relevance inference floating over the dialog, namely that Jo is now keyless, and may be unable to access the garage for a time, though that time's length is

unspecified.

However, it must be said that Relevance to the moment is sometimes difficult to see, but a contrast to 'had' will be given in a later section and should serve to supplement this afore given explanation.

3.4. Deploying Imagined Action

Continuing to build on the previous example, the further inclusion into the verbal slot of a modal as an antecedent to auxiliary verb 'have' also signals a rise in sophistication.

Jo, I would have driven my own car, but I might not HAVE found the keys in time for my appointment. So, I used your car.

In the first part of the example above, the injection of irrealis 'would' remodels the construction to carry the inference that action was imagined, rather than taken. The relevance of Jo not finding her keys is a potentially missed appointment. Even though the inclusion of 'have' occurs twice, it still communicates relevance to time but as might be expected, for slightly different moments. By definition, those moments could be future moments, although the exemplar happens to treat past moments only.

An additional task, arising from the example given, is that students need to be aware that negation placement occurs post-modal, as an antecedent to 'have'. This observation may seem frivolous, but had the exemplar's negation been contracted to the modal (rather than appearing as a separate morpheme, as shown), and thus appearing as 'might'n't', it may be true to believe that a student could be conflicted by the rise in complexity. Additionally, there is a situation in which the contraction could have occurred as 'not've', which is a circumstance in which an ESL speaker is challenged by a reduced form.

A short but non-trivial digression needs to be made here. Occasionally, teachers advise students that modal "would" is the past tense of modal "will" [8], p. 193. If this advice were to be truly substantial, such advocacy would pose an interesting question as to how a sentence should be parsed, for the benefit of ESL students. For purposes of demonstration, take the exemplar sentence above. Would it not be true that the sentence's verbal slot would need to be seen as a sequence consisting of: a so-called 'past tense' auxiliary verb (would); followed by a present tense auxiliary verb (have); which is then succeeded by a past tense verb (driven)? The sandwiching of a present tense form between two past tense forms, it would appear, might be over-challenging to explain to students!

3.5. Adding Passive Voice

One further widening of the verbal slot is given below in the form of a passive voice construction.

I still can't find my car keys. I wonder if my keys could have been hidden by my flat-mate as a joke.

In the above example, the inclusion of 'been' carries a sense of 'to have become', but also is an indicator that a process has taken place which carries an object noun into the

subject slot as well as, if it is not suppressed, a subject noun into the object slot. Additionally, the inclusion of 'been' is not optional, nor is the placement of 'been' random, and must be learned by ESL speakers.

In the example sentence below, a simpler passive form is presented, making the verbal slot slimmer.

Yes, I think it very possible that they were misplaced, perhaps even hidden, by your flat-mate.

The verbal slot is slimmer due to the elimination of irrealis 'could'; time-relevance 'have'; as well as 'been', with all eliminations in favour of 'were'. While the eliminations produced a swifter verbal description, they also resulted in achieving a degree of certainty that was lacking in the prior construction. Although the eliminations did not produce a stative sentence per se, a stative sense is nevertheless carried therein, and is similar to 'They were sick; they had become sick like this before'. Additionally, the option to surpress the second occurrence of 'were' from the verbal slot has been exercised, and this choice may not be obvious to an ESL learner trying to quickly navigate the verbal slot.

3.6. Producing Stative Sentences

The following exemplar sentence features stative forms in the verbal slot.

You ask why I look dreadful. I am crying over the car accident. I'm sorry that it was your car.

In the first and the last of the three stative sentences above, the grammatical objective is to populate the object slot with an adjective, rather than a nominal. In the middle sentence, while 'crying' can be seen as a verb indicating continuity of action, in this example, it performs also as an adjective which carries a sense of being in a state of crying.

3.7. Decoding Inflected Had

It was mentioned earlier that 'have' can be inflected to 'had', and this inflected form is demonstrated below.

I would have been distraught for hours and hours; then, I realised that I had not lost my purse. I was happy!

In its inflected form, 'had' acts like a binary switch that cancels out time-relevance. This time-relevance cancelation is evident by the final sentence. Although it is an oblique point, it is possible to say that just as past tense form (as in, 'realised') signals a completion, so too does the past tense form 'had'. Together they represent a neat affinity of purpose.

4. Conclusion

This paper presents a representative range of exemplar sentence patterns each of which would be encountered by any ESL student on a journey into full English fluency. Emphasis is placed on an understanding of the multiple patterns of construction that can occur in the verbal slot of an English sentence, and therefore includes not only verb forms but also a treatment of major auxiliaries such as modal verbs. So as not to overawe students, exemplar sentences are

restricted mainly to a declarative format but some exemplars do include a stative format.

The implication intended to be conveyed by this paper is that full familiarisation with declarative patterns, encountered in the verbal slot, will be a large determinant of whether students will be sufficiently conversant with English verbal structures to transform a declarative pattern into the range of sentence types that are used in English. This target range includes passive voice, subjunctive mood, interrogative, conditional, emphatic agreement, emphatic negation, stative as well as imperative. Although it needs not be said to a native speaker, transformation has its own set of difficulties largely because the transformation process moves beyond the verbal slot to include the subject slot, and although less frequently but more radically, transformation can include the object slot. Therefore, the fundamental premise of this paper is that help with understanding the range of options that are available in verbal slot construction, as demonstrated in this paper's choice of exemplars, will better prepare students for successful transformation experiences.

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