

Grammatical Terms and Language Learning: A Personal Perspective

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Abstract: Since the renaissance, grammatical terminology has evolved to meet the needs of linguistic analysis rather than language learning. This has given it compactness and technical precision, but at the cost of clarity to the lay person, and particularly to children, who do not yet know the full range of vocabulary and semantic structures from which terms have been chosen and developed. As a result, some terminology makes it more difficult for children and adults to understand and apply grammatical concepts as they learn their own and other languages. The author argues that bringing terminology closer to everyday language, and explaining it accurately in terms children can understand, helps improve learners' understanding of grammar and enables them to use grammar more confidently in their work.

Key words: Grammar, Terminology, Bruner

Grammatical terms were developed in order to analyse languages rather than help people to learn them. Most of those we use now date from the renaissance, though a few are inventions of modern linguistics. Some, such as subject, are adaptations of terms from philosophy, some are based on corruptions of language (tense from the old French *tens* for time) and some, such as determiner, are a lot more complex than the words they describe. To the analyst, who seeks precision, the choice of one word rather than another is not particularly important, provided other analysts know what the words mean. To the learner, grammatical terms are new, and part of the learning. A term that is simple, clearly linked to the element of language it describes, and unambiguous, helps learners to develop their understanding and control of language. One that is more complex than the element it seeks to explain, is imprecise, or is in conflict with the meaning of a word in everyday language, demands attention to the term itself than to the language it is intended to describe or explain. This can make it an obstacle rather than a help.

Too much of our current terminology, in languages and in literacy work, is in the second category, and I think we can do more to provide what Jerome Bruner called a courteous translation of adult concepts into a form that children can understand. As Bruner put it

If one respects the ways of thought of the growing child, if one is courteous enough to translate material into his logical forms and challenging enough to tempt him to advance, then it is possible to introduce him at an early age to the ideas and styles that in later life make an educated man. (Bruner, 1960: 52)

As some grammatical terms are much more important to the construction of meaningful and accurate sentences than others, we also need to establish priorities in the terms we present, and in the importance we attach to children understanding them. The suggestions here are based on work with adults and older school pupils who have had problems with literacy, as well as on my work with Hackney primary pupils. Priorities for the two groups are different, but the principle of adapting and explaining terminology so

that the learner can understand and use it is the same.

Languages are human constructs, with human characteristics and inconsistencies. In mathematical terms, they are an example of fuzzy logic rather than strict logic, and hence capable of variations that are not always reflected in the terms and guidance used to describe them. Any mismatch between the description and reality is likely to cause confusion and interfere with the learner's understanding. To avoid this, we need to examine the definitions we use carefully, to make sure we say, as closely as possible, exactly what we mean, and to avoid making statements – usually generalisations - that we may later need to contradict when an example arises that doesn't fit them.

The most important grammatical term is *verb*, and almost equally important is *subject*. It is possible to have a grammatically accurate sentence without a verb – see for example, Charles Dickens in his opening chapter of *Bleak House*: “Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights” (Dickens, 1853:1). However, such sentences are rare. Similarly, very nearly every sentence has a subject although commands such as “Go away!” do not.

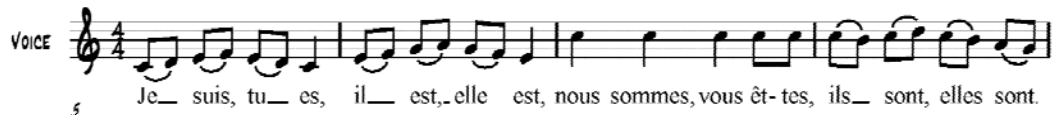
Verb is a new word for children, but it does not have any conflicting meaning in common language, and so is as straightforward to learn it as any other new word. There is a problem, though, in some teachers' understanding and presentation of the word - verbs are commonly presented as *doing words*, although the most frequent verb in European languages, *to be*, does nothing. This problem can be avoided by careful phrasing – e.g. most verbs do things, some say how we feel, some just are, so that words such as *is*, *am*, *was*, *were*, *are*, are all verbs. Chomsky's term **verb phrase** is useful as an indication that a verb can comprise more than one word (Chomsky, 1957: 26). I suggest **verb group**, as everyone knows what a group is – children from ten onwards to whom I have explained this have understood it, and it broadly means a verb plus any auxiliaries or helping words - *I have done it* or even *I was going to do it*.

Subject has the general meaning of **topic** – as it originally did in philosophy. This causes serious interference. Careful explanation and practice can help children to detect the subject of a sentence in a matter of a couple of months. I first teach children to locate the verb in a sentence, and then to find the *subject* using questions such as **'what is it?'** or **'whodunit?'** We start with sentences from a book and then proceed to sentences they have written themselves. In practice, repeating or changing a (grammatical) subject as we write means that we need to use strong punctuation – i.e. more than a comma - or a link word. This has the spinoff of helping children to think about and understand the weight of different types of punctuation, and of helping them to make an informed decision on where to break or extend a sentence.

It is this role in sentence formation – and termination – that makes **subject**, in my experience, a much more important term than many others that are usually taught prior to it. Once it is clearly understood and practised, it can be applied to verbs in new languages, where verbs vary according to their subject much more than they do in English – e.g. English, *have*, has only one variation, *has*, in the present tense, whereas French *avoir* has six. Once children have understood the idea of verb they need to know

that in most languages verbs change more often than they do in English, and that these reflect the subject. This is then reinforced by practice.

In primary schools, I do this with songs. My colleague Joseph Biswell has written a simple song for French verbs, with actions, that begins with *être* and can be extended to all other verbs. Here is the tune, which, lacking my colleague's musical ability, I usually simplify by running the set of quavers at the end into crochets:



My colleague Claire Cave has found that Spanish verbs can be sung to *10 Green Bottles*. The actions involve pointing with one hand to oneself for first person, to a partner for second person, and to someone else for third person. Repeat with two hands for plural. In Spanish, we explain that the language takes a shortcut by incorporating the subject into the verb, thus saving a word. In French, we work on the principle that the teacher is roughly twice as big as the children in the class, so they can point to us with two hands for *vous*. This is more immediate for younger children than introducing the idea of respect for elders, which can come later.

Unlike most other very frequent terms, **subject** is not a part of speech, but a term denoting a word's function in a sentence. Its counterpart, *object*, is usually much less important to the construction of a sentence, and so teaching it at the same time as *subject* adds a complication that makes subject harder to understand in the first instance. Most sentences do contain some kind of object, but there is no differentiation between subject and object nouns in English, French or Spanish, and so they only become important later, when there is a need to distinguish between *direct* and *indirect object*. *Verb* and *subject*, on the other hand, are the hub of sentence structure and their relationship is essential to communication - they are, in practice, so crucial and so frequent that I am arguing that they should be thoroughly taught and understood before any other grammatical terms are introduced in learning English, and that in other European languages the only item that should be taught at the same time is gender.

Gender needs to be introduced and practised early because it involves such a big change in thinking for native English speakers. Apart from ships, which are usually feminine, we normally only think of people as having a gender. In Hackney, we usually introduce the idea of boys' and girls' words at a very early stage, and take plenty of time to discuss it. Some children often do not understand what we mean at all at first, and it is not unusual for the penny to drop at the third time the idea is discussed or even later. One or more children will always ask: Why do they have boys' and girls' words? This is not an easy question to answer, but an answer is essential if children are not remain in confusion. I explain it by referring children to the ancient world, where religions had gods and goddesses. Most – not all, of course – modern religions have just one God. This thinking in terms of masculine and feminine ran through the whole of ancient people's view of

the world, and is reflected in the way they use words. So, ancient Greece and Rome had masculine and feminine words, much as they had gods and goddesses. English had these too, until about a thousand years ago, but does not any more. Other languages have kept them. Why? Because their speakers prefer it that way. Languages are human, and people have choices. As we learn a new language, we are not just learning new words and meanings, but the way other people think. Dividing words into boys' and girls' words is part of the way they think. Once the idea is established, we gradually introduce the terms masculine and feminine, which eventually take over.

In Spanish, it is easy to support early understanding of gender by the idea of *chico* and *chica* words. Children first identify themselves as *chico* or *chica*. Here the endings –o and –a indicate masculine and feminine gender respectively. This extends to a lot of words, although two of the most common words, *la mano* and *el día*, do not follow this pattern. What usually tells us for sure whether a noun in French or Spanish is masculine or feminine is the short word that accompanies it. For example, in French the short words *la* and *une* tell us a word is feminine, *le* or *un* that it is masculine. In grammatical terminology, these short words were known until recently as articles. This ran into interference - an article, in children's language, is an object, a thing you can touch - to adults, it can be an article that we read, a substantial piece of text rather than a short word. It is highly likely that the term article was applied to short words simply because they had to be categorised as something. The examples in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) entry are interesting on this point. Sometimes articles are now called determiners. This may help linguistic scholars, but it does not help anyone who does not know what they determine - in fact, an indefinite article does not determine anything at all.

For both adults and children, I therefore simply call articles **short words**, and explain that they are a bit like the cement between bricks. We use them because we expect to. Some languages do not, for example modern Turkish. The term **short words** makes sense to children, the term **article** does not. I have devised a song using Joe's tune to help children memorise these 'short words' in French:

Un, le, masculin

Une, la feminine

(Boys only) Je suis un garçon

(Girls only) Je suis une fille.

I have noticed that feminine words in French tend to be given more emphatic pronunciation so will often say a few words with articles and get children to put up a hand when they hear a *girls'* word. Once they can do this, I call out words and ask them if they belong to the *girls'* or *boys'* category. The format works very well with children aged six and upwards, and in Spanish we can go straight to *chico* / *chica* words without picking out the feminine ones first. Of course where a short word is abbreviated by an apostrophe, e.g. in *l'école*, the word itself does not tell us, so we have to see whether it is *une école* or *un école* - the qualification *usually*, above, is important. *Une* is more punchy than *un*, and so easy for children to pick out.

In Spanish and French, adjectives usually change with the nouns to which they refer. The term **adjective**, though, is problematic because it does not show any connection between adjectives and nouns, or otherwise describe an adjective's function. According to the OED, prior to 1600 the term was known as a **noun adjective**, to discriminate it from a **noun substantive**. A substantive could stand alone; an adjective needed something to lean on to. The OED even has the following entry from 1414: Scotland is like a noun adjective that cannot stand without a substantive.

Until this point, I do not usually introduce noun. There is no interference to noun from common speech, but there is interference to the usual explanation, name – a person has a name, but a table does not. So, when I have to introduce **noun**, I say that it is a type of word that can be a name – with a capital letter – or a thing, a feeling or a thought. I do not yet have an alternative to **adjective**, but am tempted to return to the pre-1600 term and call it a **noun-adjective**, a **noun-partner** or a **noun-describer**. This is still tentative, but we need a clear way of connecting adjectives to nouns. I thought of *adnoun*, but do not find the word attractive. Would **describer** on its own suffice?

Once **noun** is understood, **pronoun** is straightforward. We all like to take shortcuts, and a pronoun is a shortcut. I would explain it as such, and introduce it shortly after nouns in French and Spanish, to make it clear that pronouns follow nouns in terms of gender.

Adverb is not too difficult once verb is understood, and I would even borrow the common meaning of *add* to explain it – it after all simply tells us more about a verb. Two other key terms for verbs are problematic though. **Tense** is a corruption of the old French word for time. Grammarians, including David Crystal, have pointed out that **time** and **tense** do not always coincide exactly (Crystal, 1992:93), but this sees tense as an indicator of word form rather than as a time marker. Tense and time almost always correspond, and any slight imprecision is a small disadvantage compared with the loss of a clear connection with time in the English word **tense** - as soon as we try to explain **tense**, we have to return to **time**. The French use *le temps*, and Spanish *il tiempo*. We should replace tense with **time**, at least as an introductory measure, explaining variations such as *I leave tomorrow* as they arise – we are, in this as in everything else, dealing with fuzzy logic. Everyone knows, in an everyday sense, what time is, and *today*, *yesterday* and *tomorrow* are clear markers.

The term **participle** causes confusion to no advantage – it does not describe the function of the word at all. **Part verb** would be clearer and provides a link to **verb**. It is a paradox that we add something to a verb – for example, the present participle ending *-ing* – and that this takes away its completeness as a verb, so that it can't function as a verb without some kind of auxiliary. **Part verb** makes the point that the verb will not stand on its own, and is a clear step – it also fits the idea of verb group, to indicate all of the words that to make up a verb – e.g. he *was going* home.

I have just two more propositions at this stage, regarding **phoneme** and **grapheme**, which have been introduced to teach reading via linguistics. Both can be learned, but why? They are not more precise than the words of plain English. A **phoneme** is just a longer word for sound. **Sound** is a better and shorter word, and we should stick with it.

Grapheme is a unit of writing - I just call it a **letter** or **group of letters**. In the end, I believe, with Wittgenstein, that '*what can be said at all can be said simply*'. I would add: *If it can be said simply, it should be.*

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