

Lecture 11: Grammar I: Syntax

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Thomas Pinney's *A Short Handbook and Style Sheet*.

In this lecture, we will examine how grammar is *used* to improve rhetoric, approaching speech and writing not only from the point of view of the grammarian, but from that of the linguist and the philologist. However, we cannot follow the descriptive linguists, who believe that anything uttered by a native speaker of a language counts as a grammatical sentence. This may be true in their sense of studying the natural utterances of native speakers, but it is not a helpful approach to rhetorical analysis: Some grammatical usage is more effective than others; some figures of grammar are considered more beautiful or more prestigious. Grammatical rules are important for conveying the idea (true or not) that a speaker or writer is cultured, educated, and knows what he or she is talking about.

We begin, then, with one essential principle: *The purpose of grammar is to clarify meaning*. Grammar in English is a set of rules for organizing words so that a hearer or reader comes as close to understanding something the way the speaker intended for him or her to understand it. Most prescriptive rules are aimed at clearing up confusion and ambiguity.

Here it is worthwhile to review what I want to call word functions. Most people listening to this lecture are very likely not to want a review of “the parts of speech” (which include nouns, which are naming words; verbs, which refer to actions; pronouns, which stand in for nouns; adjectives, which modify nouns and pronouns; adverbs, which modify verbs and adjectives; conjunctions, which link things together; and prepositions, which indicate relationships). Far more important to us than parts of speech are the word functions, and these are slightly less familiar.

Every sentence has a subject, which does the action, and a predicate, which includes the action (the verb), what received the action (the direct object), and the indirect receiver of the action (the indirect object). Sometimes there are prepositions, and they get objects, too. But the most important thing to recognize is the distinction between subject and object. The subject is the doer, the object the thing getting done. This is so important because English makes a variety of distinctions based on whether or not something is a subject or an object. For example, we say, “He will give the book to him,” not “Him will give the book to he.”

Who and Whom

Native speakers will almost *never* get the he/him distinction wrong, but we do have trouble with *who* and *whom*. *Who* and *whom* rely on the same kinds

of subject/object distinctions as he/him or she/her, but because they are often parts of questions (which rearrange standard word order), *who* and *whom* are often confused. *Who* is always a subject; *whom* is always an object. So you use *who* in the subject position (doer of the action) and *whom* in the object position (receiver of the action). There is an even easier way, however, to solve the who/whom problem. Just mentally substitute the familiar he/him for who/whom.

So, for “Who is coming over to dinner?” substitute in “He is coming to dinner?” and note that this is grammatically correct. Then, to check, for “Whom is coming to dinner?” substitute in “Him is coming to dinner?” and recognize that it is incorrect.

Questions are created when we apply what linguists call a transformation to a statement, rearranging the word order. “To who did you give the book?” because we’ve moved the pronoun to the front of the sentence, where the subject usually goes, it seems almost as if *who* is correct, but if we perform our substitution (“To he did you give the book?”) we may recognize a problem. If we rearrange things still further (“Did you give the book to he?”), we can see that the subject-case pronoun *who* is incorrect. Substitute in the object-case pronoun *him*, however, and you get “Did you give the book to him?,” which is correct. Now swap *whom* for *him* and you read “Did you give the book to whom?,” which we rearrange into “To whom did you give the book?” That he/him substitution always works, though sometimes you have to think about it more.

Me, Myself, and I

Many, many people are sure that they get who/whom wrong, but few care very much; most just avoid using *whom*. But the next problem in subject/object relationships is far, far more anxiety-generating: people are actually terrified of using the word *me* in a plural object.

Pronouns are one of the more difficult elements of language for children to learn, because pronouns are *relational*: I can remember some frustrating conversations with my daughter that went something like this: “Do you want to go play?” “Yes. You want to go play.” “No, do *you* want to go play? *I* want *you* to tell me.” “Yes. You go play.” And so forth. The power of pronouns is that *I* and *you* switch depending on who is speaking. This takes a while to learn.

It gets even harder when you have plural subjects or objects, and this is where the problem comes in. Kids say “Me and Sam are going to the store.” Mom says “Sam and I,” giving two separate corrections (switching the order of subjects supposedly to be polite, and changing the object case pronoun to the subject). The double correction is hard to deal with, and kids do not always understand why they are being corrected, so they either adopt the correction for all plural subjects and objects or find a way around it entirely. “The teacher gave the homework to Sam and I” is incorrect, since *I* is subject case and cannot receive an action (like getting the homework). Therefore “The teacher gave the homework to Sam and me” is correct, but this seems so much like the often-corrected “Me and Sam went to the store” that people are afraid to say it. The problem gets even more tangled because African-American English (also called Black English Vernacular) has a different set of

grammatical rules governing the use of *me*, and these rules and their use (which can be inconsistent in speakers who are moving between different uses of language codes) bring in all the cultural complexities associated with crossing various social and conventional boundaries.

Interestingly enough, this problem has been solved by athletes and those who coach them on public speaking by eliminating the use of the word *me*. Listen to an athlete—of any race—being interviewed and you will find that most of them never use “me” exactly because they are avoiding the entire problem of possibly misusing the pronoun. So they say something like “Curt Schilling and myself combined to pitch a shut-out” or “Mariano Rivera threw gopher-balls to David Ortiz and myself.” *Myself* is not technically correct, but as it is a reflexive pronoun, it is not changed from subject to object, so therefore a speaker does not need to stop to think about whether to use a subject or object form.

A relatively simple solution to the “me, myself, and I” problem—without just substituting *myself*—is to break the plural subject or object into two pieces: “Manny Ramirez and X hit home runs” into “I hit home runs.” “Curt Schilling threw strike-out pitches to Derek Jeter and X” into “Curt Schilling threw strike-out pitches to me.”

The major point to get out of this lecture and the next one is that 99 percent of your spoken grammar is flawless, but that there are a few small areas in which a mistake stands out. So we work on correcting those and suddenly you have the appearance of flawless grammar (which you were very close to having in the first place).

In the next lecture, we’re going to discuss some things that are a little more subtle—that is, they don’t *feel* as obviously wrong as “Whom is going to the store” or “Him and me went to the store.” Some of these things, such as split infinitives, are rather stupid. Some, like dangling participles, actually confuse your readers or hearers. Others, like saying “very unique,” are deeply wrong but do not immediately seem to be. We will also talk about that other bugaboo of speakers and writers: punctuation, which is in fact your friend, but which scares people. In all cases, grammar, punctuation, and the various subtleties of word choice and usage should not be seen as obstacles to writing but rather as techniques by which you can improve your readers’ understanding and thus more easily gain agreement—which is the major purpose of rhetoric.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is the purpose of grammar?
2. Why are people so afraid to use *me* in a plural object?

Suggested Reading

Pinney, Thomas. *A Short Handbook and Style Sheet*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1977.

Other Books of Interest

Fowler, Henry. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. 2nd rev. ed. Intro. Simon Winchester. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.