Awakening Inherent Linguistic Structures: Modification and Order

Tanmoy Bhattacharya

Abstract

This article highlights the benefits of using certain linguistic tools to analyse texts in a typical school textbook. It takes up two poems in English and Hindi of Class 4 to demonstrate that a teacher aware of the structure of sentences can bring about a transformative change in the learning imparted.

Keywords: Textbook, poems, grammar, modifiers, word order

Understanding the nature of a textbook is the primary task that aids in streamlining language teaching in classrooms. However, such an understanding can only stem from analysing a textbook, not merely being familiar with a textbook through teaching. Analysing textbooks is rewarding in two ways: it raises awareness about linguistic structures and addresses social inequity, which ultimately feeds into designing better teacher training manuals through discussion with teachers.

An Example

Let me provide a simple example of this. Linguistically, Manipur and Nagaland are the most diverse states of India, as far as the number of primary mother tongues is concerned—sixteen in Manipur and fifteen in Nagaland. Zeroing in on Manipur, let us look at the geographical distribution of only six of the sixteen such mother tongues (Mao, Tangkhul, Meiteilon (Manipuri), Thadou, Tarao, Hmar) as in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Location of the Six Languages

These languages fall within the so-called[1] Naga-Kuki-Chin subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. The first two of the above list are clearly Naga languages, whereas the last three are clearly Kuki (or Chin) languages—in short, Meiteilon is surrounded by Naga and Kuki languages. The point to note is that although these are all Tibeto-Burman languages, they are not mutually intelligible.

Let me take a simple nominal expression (technically denoted as an NP or Noun Phrase) consisting of a Demonstrative (DEM) and a Noun (N), as in the English NP 'this book'; we can say that the *order* of words in this phrase is DEM-N. If we collect examples from the six languages in the list for a simple NP, we obtain the following orders:

    Mao/Tangkhul: N-DEM

Meiteilon: (DEM)-N-DEM

Thadou: DEM-N

Tarao: N+DEM

Hmar: DEM-N-DEM

The 'structural awareness' that ought to result from dealing with the above examples at some point in a classroom, can be graphically represented as in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Graphical Representation of NP Structure

	N	- DEM
(DEM) -	N	- DEM
DEM -	N	
	N	+ DEM
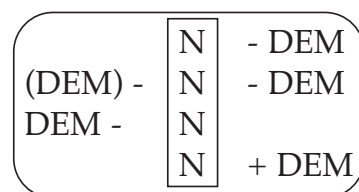
The above pattern reveals that there is something central (N) and something peripheral (DEM). This pattern graphically demonstrates the structural similarity between the six languages in spite of the differences. An innovative teacher can employ appropriate student-centric activities in a multilingual classroom, so that the knowledge about the commonality among the languages can emerge. Students themselves may arrive at the conclusion that N is the essential component of NP in any language; that DEM is often optional and may precede or follow the N.

This structural awareness-building exercise contributes to the emergence of self-constructed knowledge of "commonality despite diversity" in the learners' minds. Such a progression from "awareness" to "knowledge" can be a transformative tool to the self-realization that, after all, we are not that different from each other.

The above simple exercise shows us the twofold benefit of analysing a piece of ordinary language data: an awareness of the structure inherent in languages and an awareness of human universality despite social inequities. Thus, using simple linguistic tools, we can apply similar analyses to understand materials in school textbooks.

Textbooks

Some of the grammatical phenomena that we can pick out for designing exercises that feed into the project of structural awareness building are the following:

  – Modifiers and their positions
  – Word order
  – Complex sentences
  – Verbal complexes
  – Argument structure of verbs
  – Verb ellipses and verb movement
  – Complex predicates
  – Pro-drop

At least three from the above list can be found in any text in a textbook. It is possible to design exercises and activities based on these themes or a combination of them. Such exercises and activities can encourage the learner to develop an awareness of a language's structural/ grammatical properties. Note that most language textbooks have a section titled ''Language Study'' consisting of sentence making, synonyms, and antonyms as three sub-parts. This is a faulty interpretation of what language means; there is almost nothing that one can possibly learn from synonyms or antonyms about a language [2]—it is a case of a remnant of an old habit of rote learning. For demonstration, I will take up the first two from the above list.

Modification

For demonstration, let us randomly pick up the first lesson of the Class 4 English textbook called *Marigold* of NCERT:

> **Neha's Alarm Clock**
> *Wake up! Wake up!*
> *It's a <u>lovely</u> day.*
> *Oh! Please get up*
> *And come and play.*
> *The birds are singing <u>in the trees</u>,*
> *And you can hear the <u>buzzing</u> bees*
> *Wake up! Wake up!*
> *It's a <u>lovely</u> day.*
> *Oh! Please get up*
> *And come and play.*
> *It's <u>much too</u> late to lie <u>in bed</u>,*
> *So hurry up, you <u>sleepy</u> head.*

Seven elements are underlined in this poem, all of which have a similar function in the respective sentences—they are all modifying the following expression (a noun or an adjective) or a preceding one (a verb). The students can be asked to identify the modifying function and then group these (underlined expressions) into different subgroups (adjectives/ degree expressions and adverbs of place in the form of preposition phrases). A teacher can engage their students for several classes on this topic till the learners understand the structure. An introduction to either the term adjective or its definition can wait till the students come to learn the function of modification by themselves. If we start with a definition and an example, then provide a bunch of phrases for the students to select adjectives or adverbs to identify, it will prevent them from actually learning. Whereas if they are instead made to 'play' with the poem for a few days, they may struggle initially but will eventually construct the knowledge themselves.

Let us now look at a Hindi poem. I picked the first lesson of a textbook prescribed in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Before we look at the poem, it is instructive to look at the learning goals of the poem (Figure 3):

Figure 3: Learning Goals for a Poem in Class 4 Textbook of MP

पाठ 1

प्रार्थना

आइए सीखें – ● कविता का हाव–भाव एवं लय के साथ वाचन। ● कविता के भाव ग्रहण करना। ● कविता को कण्ठस्थ करना। ● समानार्थी एवं विलोम शब्दों की समझ।

The note reads: 'Let us learn: reciting of the poem with feeling and rhythm, to understand the meaning of the poem, to memorize the poem, and to understand synonyms and antonyms'; in short, it predetermines how learning ought to take place.

Now, let us look at the first stanza of the poem (I provide the English transliterated version under each Hindi line and its meaning in English):

आँख खोलकर सुबह-सुबह मैं मन में कहता हूँ,
*aankh kholkar subah-subah **main** man mein **kahtaa huun***
/Opening my eyes early in the morning I say in my mind, /

प्रभु तेरा उपकार कि मैं भारत में रहता हूँ।
prabhu teraa upkaar ki main bhaarat mein rahtaa huun.
/Lord, thank you that I live in Bharat (India)/.

मेरी मातृभूमि है भारत, मैं भारत के योग्य बनूँ,
merii matribhumi hai bhaarat, main bhaarat ke yogya banuun,
/India is my Motherland, I should be worthy of India/,

मातृभूमि की प्रकृति, पुरुष, पशु सबको अपना सगा गिनूँ।
matribhumi kii prakriti, purush, pashu sabko apnaa sagaa ginuun.
/The motherland's nature, men, animals all should count as my companions/.

Suppose we concentrate on the first line and try to look for the modifiers, we will see that *subah-subah* (adverb of time), *aankh kholkar* (adverb of manner), and *man mein*, which is a metaphorically abstract adverb of place, are all doing the function of modification. The most important part of the first line is *main kahtaa huun* (marked in bold in the transliteration), everything else is a modification. The situation is shown even more clearly below:

आँख खोलकर   सुबह-सुबह   मैं   मन में   कहता हूँ
    1   2   3

Note here that the order of the modifiers is MANNER (M) > TIME (T) > PLACE (P). Note that apart from this order, as in the actual poem, there is only one other order possible, all other orders are not as acceptable in Hindi (marked here with a ?). These orders may be acceptable with a different set of modifiers.

M > T > P (given)
T > M > P (possible)
? M > P > T
? T > P > M
? P > M > T
? P > T > M

Note further that in the first line of the poem that we are talking about,

we have four possible positions of all the modifiers:

<div align="center">[1] मैं [2] कहता [3] हूँ [4]</div>

Now, try putting one modifier at a time (M, T, or P) at each of these four positions, and find out what are all the acceptable positions of modifiers individually. You will probably find at least the following:

    a. [2] is the most preferred position for the modifiers

    b. [4] is the most unlikely position for the modifiers

    c. [3] is acceptable for some contexts

    d. [1] is fine for some but not so fine for some others

There are valid linguistic explanations for all these. For example, the fact that [2] is the most likely position for these modifiers is ruled by the simple fact that there is a *natural* break in the sentence at that position— the break between the subject of a sentence (मैं) and its predicate (कहता हूँ), and since all these modifiers are in fact adverbs, which by definition say something about the verb (action/state), naturally appear at the start of a complete phrase containing the verb, namely the verb phrase (VP).

It is quite easy, I believe, to design language games, or activities, based even on this much rudimentary information. For example, the students could be asked first to detect the modifiers in a classroom situation and then to determine their order possibilities. Further on, they can be asked to play around with the order and observe what happens—does the sentence retain its original meaning or is there a shift in interpretation, etc.

Again, all these are well-studied linguistic topics and have very logical explanations. For example, these so-called modifiers are called 'adjuncts'. One property that distinguishes adjuncts from the more fixed elements like subjects or objects of sentences is their relative free mobility—they can move around in a sentence, shifting, nonetheless, the interpretation ever so slightly. In addition, students also thus end up learning that any change in order happens for a reason and is not random.

Order

At the level of Class 4, the teaching guides of most of the states of India discuss complex topics like subject-verb agreement in English. However, even in this case an awareness of simpler topics like the nature of word

order must be assumed. Such guides, therefore, must assume that the basic order of words in a canonical (that is, a simple, ordinary sentence) English sentence is Subject (S) - Verb (V) - Object (O). In contrast, it is S-O-V in Hindi and most other languages spoken in India. The modifiers exercise assumes that the learner will find the S, O, and V of a sentence and their orders. Once the students are sensitized to the issue of word order, we can bring up the first four lines of the English poem 'Neha's Alarm Clock' discussed earlier:

  a. Wake up! Wake up!
  b. It's a lovely day.
  c. Oh! Please get up.
  d. And come and play.

One can plausibly design activities to test students' learning of word order by letting them figure out that except for line 'b', above, all the other lines do not have the subject of the sentence specified. Thus, though subjects and objects are more fixed, as stated earlier in connection with adjuncts, even in a fixed order language like English, it is possible not to have the subject present overtly.

Traditionally, this is taught by prescribing the rule that English can drop the subject only in imperative type sentences where the subject is in the second person ('you'). There is a more sensible, linguistically informed way of imparting this knowledge without taking recourse to rote learning a 'rule'. Note that Indian students, being speakers of one or more Indian languages, are already quite familiar with this aspect of their language, namely, dropping a pronoun that stands for either the subject, object, or even the indirect object.

For example, we can go back to the first line of the Hindi poem and point out that the verb in question 'say' (कहता) is a transitive verb requiring an object (O), and proceed to ask the students to find out the object. Very soon, it will be realized that the object does not appear in the line itself, but rather in the following line, and in fact, that the whole second line of the stanza *is* the object of that verb, namely, [प्रभु तेरा उपकार कि मैं भारत में रहता हूँ]. This implies that as far as the first sentence (line) is concerned, it has a missing object; this can be represented as follows:

  मैं [∅] कहता हूँ
  I say am

The missing object here is represented by the symbol $\varnothing$. Thus, the whole of the second line refers to this 'empty' position. However, the second sentence itself is not a simple sentence since it is made up of two sentences, and in addition, it is a rather complicated complex sentence. Notice that *ki* (कि) 'that' is the 'joiner' or the glue that combines two simple sentences, which are as follows (I provide word-to-word meaning under each sentence):

> a. प्रभु तेरा उपकार
>
> Lord, your favour
>
> b. मैं भारत में रहता हूँ.
>
> I India in live am

If we pay attention, we will notice that first of these, a. has things missing. The sentence roughly translates into English as: *Lord, it is your favour*. If this is so, we can then figure out that the subject of the sentence and its verb are missing, represented as follows:

$$\text{प्रभु } [\varnothing_1] \text{ तेरा उपकार } [\varnothing_2]$$

That is, there are now two things missing, $\varnothing_1$ representing the missing object and $\varnothing_2$ representing the missing verb, where the second sentence, that is b. refers to $\varnothing_1$ and $\varnothing_2$ will simply be recovered by the native speaker by their knowledge of the language.

As one can easily guess, a native speaker of any South Asian language is thus very familiar with dropping 'things' from a sentence in the grammar of their language, which should not be considered a 'mistake' but rather as a property of such languages. Suppose in an English classroom, this knowledge of dropping crucial elements of a sentence, like subject, direct object, indirect object, or even the verb in the mother tongue, is brought forth, then teaching the English 'rule' of the obligatory dropping of the second person subject in imperative contexts will become that much easier and sensible.

Conclusion

The foregoing has shown that nothing in the examples above (picked randomly) violates any known principle of grammar; this, in itself, is a valuable lesson to impart to students - that everything in language is for a reason and as per the principles of grammar in mind. Additionally, it is shown that an awareness of the structural aspects of language can make learning more meaningful, and I think, interesting.

Notes

1. See Bhattacharya, (2017) for an argument on how Meiteilon (Manipuri) does not fall within the Naga-Kuki-Chin subgroup of languages.
2. For instance, rarely, if ever, are antonyms 'derived' linguistically from synonyms, unlike, for example, plurals from singulars. Thus, the only linguistic connection between *tall* and *short* is that both are adjectives but one is not derived from the other.

Reference

Bhattacharya, T. (2017). Peopling of the Northeast, Part 5. *neScholar*, Vol. 3(3), 54–64. http://people.du.ac.in/~tanmoy/papers/peopling_Part5.pdf

Tanmoy Bhattacharya *is a Professor at the Department of Linguistics, University of Delhi; within linguistics, he works on the syntax of various Indian languages. Within disability studies, he works on inclusion.*

tanmoy1@gmail.com.