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The Two Concepts of Grammaticality and Acceptability in English

Kadhim Naji Obeid Al-Rifaee

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Philadelphia University, Jordan

Email address:

Kad72@hotmail.com

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Abstract: This study is generally intended to give a comprehensive account of the two concepts of grammaticality and acceptability in English. As the use of English, as the first universal language, increases in the trend towards globalization, the demand for deciding which form(s) of this language is/are merely grammatical, and which is/are both grammatical and acceptable. That is due to the fact that information as whether or not a native speaker regards an utterance syntactically correct and/or semantically appropriate is of particular interest in linguistics. So, the question of 'What counts as a grammatical or an acceptable English sentence?' is not always a question which permits a decisive answer, and this is not because of

the difficulty of segmenting a discourse into sentences but because questions of grammatical acceptability overlap with questions of meaning, with questions of good or bad style, with questions of lexical acceptability and with questions of appropriateness in contexts. This study comes as a reaction to the serious confusion users of English feel with when trying to get sure whether or not their grammatical language is accepted. It tackles the (in)direct reasons and judgments of acceptability. It also presents brief views of some researchers who consider the topic of grammaticality and acceptability a fundamental requirement in the acquisition of English especially as a second/foreign language. Accordingly, studies of pragmatic and discourse competences, which focus on the process of achieving mutual intelligibility in spoken or written texts, gain increasing significance.

1. Introduction

1.1. Preamble

Chomsky (1977) argues that grammars should attempt to reach the higher level of descriptive adequacy at which a correct account is given not just of the primary linguistic data but also of the native speaker–hearer's intrinsic competence; i.e., his linguistic knowledge. Such a grammar would record the significant linguistic generalizations about a language and thus give an insight not only into the language go under investigation but also into the minds of those who speak it.

The Two Concepts of Grammaticality ……………………………………………

As regards what this paper deals with, information as whether or not a native speaker regards an utterance syntactically correct and/or semantically appropriate is of particular interest in linguistics. The researcher thinks that little attention is paid to the concept of acceptability in English as compared with the notion of grammaticality since it is seen primitive, i.e., pre−theoretical. Besides, investigations of such a phenomenon by their nature are time−consuming since they involve many informants and sentence patterns. So, the question of 'what counts as a grammatical or an acceptable English sentence?' is not always a question which permits a decisive answer, and this is not because of the difficulty of segmenting a discourse into sentences but because questions of grammatical acceptability overlap with questions of meaning, with questions of good or bad style, with questions of lexical acceptability and with questions of appropriateness in context.

In the traditional schools of English, what is given about acceptability is no more than the judgment of whether this or that utterance is 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong', 'correct' or 'incorrect'. And this is what motivated linguists to think of theoretical terms such as 'GRAMMATICALITY', on which they can judge if certain expressions or structures are acceptable or not. What makes the problem more complicated is that native speakers themselves differ from one another when deciding why such an utterance is acceptable due to the different factors and reasons which will be mentioned later. This is due to the absence of syntactic or semantic rules by which such a problem can be controlled. This

paper is another support to the considerable attention devoted by Chomsky to refining the syntactic apparatus for handling the treatment of selective restriction rules, and to handle such restrictions in semantic terms. Now it can be said that ACCEPTABILITY becomes worth of investigation specially for the sake of those who use one language as native speakers and others to whom the language in question is a second/foreign one.

Venuti (2004: 165) states that "appropriateness of the message within the context is not merely of the referential content of the words. The total impression of a message consists not merely in the objects, events, abstractions, and relations symbolized by the words, but also in the stylistic selection and arrangement of such symbols. Moreover, the standards of stylistic acceptability for various types of

discourse differ radically from language to language." One aim of this paper is then to shed lights on the 'why' and 'how' of deciding acceptability in English and to make both native and non−native speakers be acquainted with the factors, results and techniques that govern acceptability in English although such factors are already known to the native ones. One other purpose for this study is to know whether there are difficulties affecting the judgment of this acceptability.

1.2. Review

Traditionally, much attention was paid by grammarians to the question of 'right' and 'wrong' in speech and writing; i.e., the judgments of whether usages are 'correct' or 'incorrect' (Hartmann, and Stork, 1972:55). Such judgments are avoided nowadays since recent investigations of social dialects have

shown that each variety of a language has its own internal standard of acceptability and what is correct in one dialect may not be socially acceptable in another. Structuralists, in modern linguistics, have come to apply 'Pragmatics' to the study of language from the point of view of the users. They think that native speakers may utter expressions or form constructions for which no explanation, related to any of the linguistic terms, can be given. That is, they cannot be explained neither syntactically nor semantically. So, they would be part of the user's pragmatic competence. The term 'pragmatics' deals only with those aspects of context which are formally encoded in the structure of language. At the opposite extreme, it has been defined as the study of those aspects of meaning not covered by a semantic theory.

The term 'intuition' is also used in linguistics referring to the judgment of a native speaker about his language, specially in deciding the acceptability of a sentence and how sentences are interrelated. The native-speaker's intuition is always a crucial form of evidence in linguistic analysis. It is important to distinguish the intuition of the native speaker from that of the linguist. When the linguist investigates his own language, his intuition concerning the accuracy or elegance of his analysis is quite different in kind from that of the non-linguist whose intuition concerns the sameness, differences and relatedness of meaning. But, as it is well known, intuitions differ because of variations in regional and social backgrounds, age, personal references and so on.

'' is another term first used by TGG to explain whether an

utterance is grammatical or not. Thus, terms such as 'well-formed' and 'ill-formed' are also used to describe a sentence which compiles with a set of given grammatical rules or established norms. The term 'well-formedness' is then used to refer to the grammaticality of a sentence. So, the sentence is 'well-formed' if it can be generated by the rules of a grammar; otherwise it is ill-formed.

In his original discussion of the concept of 'well-formedness' or 'grammaticalness', Chomsky (1957:13) defines a grammatical sentence as the one that is acceptable to a native speaker.

2. Acceptability in English

The term 'ACCEPTABILITY' is first introduced by Chomsky in his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax.* (1965:10-15) Within Chomiskyan Theory, this term involves knowledge and abilities that go well beyond purely linguistic aspects. In other words, it is a concept that does not apply exclusively to grammar. Thus, acceptability, according to this theory, is a performance notion. In this case, it is thought that one is to distinguish between 'well-formedness' and acceptability, one has to make a distinction between competence and performance. (Smith, 1979:44)

Crystal (1985: 2) states that acceptability means the extent to which linguistic data would be judged by native speakers (informants) to be possible in their language due to whether an acceptable utterance is one whose use would be considered permissible or normal. To Lyon (1968: 137), acceptability is a primitive or pre-scientific term which is natural with respect to a number of different distinctions such as the distinction that is traditionally made

between 'grammaticality' and 'meaningfulness'. It is more primitive than either of the above mentioned terms in the sense that, unlike these terms, acceptability does not depend upon any theoretical definitions or concepts of linguistics. (By 'primitive' is meant within the theory, pre–theoretical). Lyon (ibid) thinks that an acceptable utterance is the one that has been or might be produced by a native speaker in some appropriate context and is or would accepted by other native speakers as belonging to the language in question. He (ibid) adds that native speakers may find a particular sentence unacceptable because, for example, they consider it absurd or because they cannot find it a plausible context for its use or because it sounds clumsy or impolite. In this regards, Venuti (2004: 208) thinks that subscription of norms originating in the target

language as part of culture determines its acceptability. That is "the target text would not meet the criteria of acceptability set by the literary situation." (ibid: 357)

3. Reasons and Factors of Acceptability

The degree of acceptability depends on some reasons and factors. Below are the main of such reasons and factors:

1. Most grammarians and linguists think that one reason for whether or not a sentence or an utterance is acceptable is that intuitions differ because of some variations in regional and social backgrounds, age, preferences and so on.

2. Various dialects can be considered one main reason since an utterance may be normal in one dialect but abnormal in another.

3. Much also depends on the extent to which people have been brought

to believe that certain forms of language are 'correct' and others are 'wrong'.

4. Personal, cultural and religious beliefs about the world can be regarded as another factor.

5. The misuse of grammatical rules is one more reason for (un)acceptability. So, one rule is very comprehensive in the sense that it undoubtedly generates an enormous number of acceptable sentences which would fail to pass the test of acceptability in normal circumstances of use.

4. Judgments of Acceptability

James (1991: 291) states that the second/foreign language study centers on the role of language knowledge in making judgments of acceptability. In other words, what language abilities are tapped when second/foreign learners at various stages of language proficiency make judgments of acceptability? In this regards, James (ibid: 301) mentions that in the present study, this subject demonstrates that the better readers are those most apt at making judgments of acceptability. The question who gives judgments is logical as it concerns the acceptability or unacceptability of sentences. Radford (1988:11) thinks that largely native speakers give judgments about this case. He states that such judgments depend entirely on their cultural, religious or personal backgrounds and not on any linguistic knowledge they have about their language. But, it may be that the information makes a hasty and perhaps erroneous judgment for one reason or another. In such a case, performance is a poor reflection of competence. Chomsky (1977) thinks that native speakers of a language have the ability to make performance

judgments about sentence acceptability. But, because of performance factors, these judgments cannot always be taken to be reliable; for example, what an informant dismisses as an unacceptable structure may in fact be perfectly well-formed in an appropriate context.

Moreover, native speakers cannot say how or why one sentence sounds okay and one other sentence sounds odd. Let's examine what Chomsky (1977: 4) remarks:

"We may make an intuitive judgment that some linguistic expression is odd deviant. But we cannot in general know whether this deviance is a matter of syntax, semantics, pragmatics, belief, memory limitations, style, etc."

Indeed, it seems surprising that informants should not be able to tell you whether a sentence is pragmatically or syntactically ill-formed for these very notions are terms borrowed from the linguistic theory. They are meaningless to those not familiar with the theory. An informant simply gives judgments about acceptability which the linguist translates into judgments about well-formedness depending on the basis of the internal organization of his own theory. That is the grammaticality judgments of speakers-hearers must be explained in some terms by the psychologist who is concerned with the psychological reality of linguistic knowledge. However, he is not committed to accepting every judgment at face-value; he may choose to ignore some of them in

writing a grammar, and he is likely to make this choice for one or two reasons. Either there is a clear non-linguistic explanation for them, and he has no need to account for them in the grammar; or there is no clear non-linguistic explanation, but it is impossible to account for them within the type of grammar he believes to correct. Let us, for example, know why some people find the sentence below unacceptable:

1. The boy next door never loses her temper with anyone. (Radford, 1988: 14)

We might claim that the oddity here is syntactic in nature; that is, the possessive pronoun 'her' is feminine, and hence does not agree in gender with its antecedent namely the NP 'The boy next door' which is masculine in gender. Or, we can claim that the oddity is semantic in nature; thus, part of the meaning of the word 'boy' is that it denotes a male human being, whereas part of the meaning of 'her' is that it refers to an entity thought of a female. So, we have a contradiction which gives rise to semantic anomaly. The question to be raised now is whether the previous sentence is acceptable or unacceptable. Well, perhaps neither. Now, consider the status of expressions such as:

2. The christians which we threw to the lions (ibid)

At first sight, this phrase might seem to be linguistically unacceptable. After all, it violates the rule given by Quirk (1985: 314) that 'which' requires noun-personal antecedent since 'christians' are people; the rule is obviously flouted here. So, we might say that this phrase is syntactically ill-formed. But does this mean that it is unacceptable?

It is easy enough to think of contexts in which this phrase could be acceptable; for example, suppose

the christians were dead before being thrown to the lions, or suppose that the phrase was uttered by somebody who despised christians. The fact is that it is possible to think of contexts in which this expression would be accepted when trying to judge acceptability. Much the same point could be made about the following phrase:

3. The tree who(m) we saw .. (opcit)

Once again there is violation; 'who(m)' requires a personal antecedent since 'trees' are not people. So, we might be tempted to conclude that this phrase is ungrammatical or semantically ill-formed. As such, this expression would be fully acceptable in a 'fairy story' context in which 'trees' carry with them implications that they are thought of as having human qualities. (i.e., in traditional terminology trees are personified)

However, one should not expect that the acceptability judgments of a speaker will correspond directly to the theoretical concept of well-formedness: there is no reason to assume, for example, that he will spontaneously base his judgment exclusively on what the linguist takes to be purely linguistic considerations– for example, well-formed sentences of great complexity or those expressing absurdities may be judged unacceptable whereas certain types of deviant sentences for which plausible interpretations can be found may be judged acceptable.

Difficulties of Acceptability Judgments

Quirk, et al, (1985: 16) mention that the borderline between grammar and semantics is unclear and linguists will draw the line variously. This may lead us to think that the borderline between

grammatical and semantic judgments is unclear, too. The following statements may help to realize this idea:

4. John killed the stone.

5. John killed Mary, but she didn't die.

6. Killed Mary John.

(4) is pragmatically anomalous because it presupposes that the stone was alive at some stage. Hence (4) is acceptable in a fairy story context where the stone is treated as a living entity. Likewise, (5) is a straightforward case of semantic ill-formedness because it expresses a contradiction, and (6) is a simple case of ungrammaticality since English does not permit verb-initial word order in declarative sentences.

At first sight it might appear that the term 'acceptable' is redundant and introduces unnecessary complications. It might be claimed that if a given utterance is said to be acceptable means that it has been produced by a native speaker and that it would be possible for a linguist to collect all the sentences of a language and put them in corpus. But this view is erroneous. More recently, many linguists have declared that their descriptions of a particular corpus of material are valid only for the sentences actually occurring in the corpus carrying no implications as to what other sentences might be produced by native speakers of the language in question. Even when talking about T.G.G, it is still difficult for transformationalists to generalize how to treat unacceptable or abnormal sentences. However, such attitudes are both theoretically and practically untenable. Suppose one rule is very productive in the sense that it undoubtedly generates an enormous number of acceptable

sentences. But it is perhaps too comprehensive since it also generates very many sentences which would fail to pass the test of acceptability in normal circumstances of use. For example, many 'normally' unacceptable sentences are deliberately introduced in the context of linguistic discussion and in similar 'abnormal' circumstance. Since all the sentences generated by one certain rule are thereby defined as grammatical, we must either amend the rule to exclude some of the sentences which we consider to be unacceptable or account for their unacceptability, if it can be accounted for in total description of the language, in terms of the incompatibility of the meanings of particular subclasses of words or some other way.

5. Rules and Techniques

In the description of a modern language, the linguist will usually have available a collection of recorded utterances (his 'data' or 'corpus') and he will also be able to consult native speakers of the language (his 'informants'). As the description proceeds, the linguist can obtain further utterances of various kinds from his informants, and so extend the corpus. He can also check with them the acceptability of sentences which he himself constructs in order to test the generality of his tentative rules. If he finds that his informants will not accept as natural or normal sentences some utterances which satisfy the rules of acceptability which he has so far established, then he must, if possible, revise the rules so that they exclude the 'sentence' in question, whilst still allowing all the acceptable sentences

for which they set up in the first place.

Chomsky (quoted by Smith, 1979; 236) argues that grammar should attempt to reach the higher level of descriptive adequacy of which a correct account is given, not of the primary linguistic data, but also of the native speaker-hearer's intrinsic competence: that is his linguistic knowledge.

Grammatical rules are based on the linguistic generalizations and regularities derived from the judgments and recorded by grammar itself to give an insight not only into the language under investigation but also into the minds of those who speak it. These rules predict which sentences will be acceptable or well-formed and which will not. If such prediction matches the grammatical judgments of the native speaker, then the rules that make the predictions can be said to

characterize or match the knowledge of the native speaker.

Occasionally, linguists design elicitation tests to determine whether or not a particular utterance is regarded as acceptable to an informant. (Hartmann, 1972:2) In this respect, linguists devise several techniques for investigating the acceptability of linguistic data. These usually take the form of experiments in which native speakers are asked to evaluate sets of utterances containing those language features over whose acceptability there is some doubt.

An utterance which is considered unacceptable is marked by an asterisk (*), if 'marginally acceptable' usually by a question mark (?).Quirk, et al (1985:16) state that sentences are in general fully acceptable if they are left unmarked. If native speakers differ in their reactions, we put the asterisk or

query in parentheses. Consider the examples below:

7a. It is raining cats and dogs.

(*) 7b. It is raining dogs and cats.

(*) 7c. It is raining a cat and a dog.

(?) 8. A man picked up an umbrella who was smiling.

The last sentence reflects that it is quite clear that any attempt to formulate a purely linguistic condition governing the application of extraposition from NP will be very complex indeed. Moreover, it seems that the application of such a rule has to be sensitive to a number of linguistic and contextual factors which by definition fall outside the scope of a grammar, but which affect the acceptability in context of all the various sentences given below (Smith, 1979: 236):

9a. A man came in who was smiling.

(?) 9b. A man picked up an umbrella who was smiling.

9c. A man who was smiling came in.

10a. I saw a girl last Tuesday who was wearing a long shirt.

(?) 10b. I gave a girl a bookmark who was wearing a long shirt.

10c. I saw a girl who was wearing a long shirt last Tuesday.

By the same token, if (9 b) and (10 b) are grammatical, they would relate to (9 d) and (10 d):

9d. A man who was smiling picked up an umbrella.

10d. I gave a girl a bookmark who was wearing a long shirt a bookmark.

In other words, unless we are prepared to let these marginal and delicate cases alter our whole conception of grammar, we will be forced to treat all the sentences in (9) and (10) as equally grammatical

and invoke some non–linguistic explanation for their variation in acceptability. Crystal (1985: 3) summarizes this fact stating that "in generative linguistic theory, variations in acceptability are analyzed in terms of performance; grammaticality, by contrast, is a matter of competence".

6. Conclusions

In English and the world languages as well, it seems that not all the expressions, utterances and structures are judged to be good or bad. The judgment is not based whether the structure is grammatical or ungrammatical. So, ungrammatical structures are sometimes judged to be correct while others are refused although they are structured according to one grammatical rule or another. That is due to a concept called 'acceptability' according to which the structure is

said to be either 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable'. It appears that certain features of acceptability are universal or at least very general, and this is the basis of the translatability of the utterances of one language into those of another. The researcher thinks that it is better not to exaggerate when extending examples of acceptability. That is because when a collection has become almost universal in a particular style, the contribution of some of its words comes to be nugatory, and as a result it often appears irritating inelegance to listeners or readers. The reader will be painfully able to multiply the examples from his own experience.

The term 'acceptable' not only has the advantage of stressing the operational connection between the linguist's raw material and its ultimate source of control in the reactions of native speakers. It also

emphasizes the fact that the linguist must account not only for the utterances which have actually occurred in the pat but also for very many others which might equally well have occurred and might occur in the future. It seems that largely native speakers (informants) give judgments about the acceptability of sentences. But, the present writer finds that such judgments must be explained in some terms by a linguist who is concerned with the psychological reality of linguistic knowledge; i.e., a psychologist. However, he is not committed to accepting every judgment at face-value. As it is said before, the linguist may choose to ignore some of them in writing a grammar, and he is likely to make this choice for one of two reasons: either there is a clear non-linguistic explanation for them and hence there is no need to account for them, or there is no clear

non-linguistic explanation but it is impossible to account for them within the type of grammar he believes to be correct. The researcher thinks that our theory of language has now come to a point where we no longer have to tie ourselves in knots on the subject of grammaticality. In other words, unless we are prepared to let the marginal and delicate cases alter our whole conception of grammar, we will be forced to treat all acceptable utterances which need not be the realization of fully grammatical sentences as equally grammatical and invoke some non-linguistic explanation for their variation in acceptability. In this respect, the researcher supports what Lyons (1968: 137) states that it is part of the linguist's task, though not the whole of it, to specify as simply as possible for the language he is describing what sentences are acceptable, and to do this in terms of

some general theory of language structure. It is also necessary to have such techniques for judging acceptability, especially in speech, as very many utterances are produced as questionable sentences. In this respect, the researcher concludes that the expressions, utterances and constructions made by native speakers for which no explanation related to any linguistic term can be given, should be given more attention since they cause some problems to non–native speakers in particular.

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