
LING 203 Workshop Week 2

The purpose of (studying) grammar

I. Summarise Ch.1 from B&B (2001)

II. Questions directly related to the lecture

1. Consider the following text:

Prescriptivism and ignorance: together again

One of the listener letters read on Here and Now today complained about some newscaster's failure to use "subjunctive case".

... in our segment on the new film *The Corporation*, we posed the question "if a corporation was a person, what kind of person would it be?"

Well, this prompted K.G. Hynes [?] of Jenkintown PA to write:

While indeed legally a corporation is considered a person, in point of fact it is a company. For instance, a corporation can be sued, but it can't literally be sent to jail, only people can. Ergo, your introductory sentence should have been put in the subjunctive case: 'What if the corporation WERE a person.' The subjunctive case is used when the statement is contrary to actual fact, as in 'I wish I were on vacation.'

The Here and Now newsreader responded mildly "Oh, don't we all."

I thought this was an especially nice little example of a correlation that might seem surprising, until you think of it: the people who complain the most about linguistic usage are also usually the people who are most ignorant and confused about how to analyze it and describe it. The subjunctive has been dying out in English for a few hundred years, as the *American Heritage Book of English Usage* explains:

... over the last 200 years even well-respected writers have tended to use the indicative *was* where the traditional rule would require the subjunctive *were*. A usage such as *If I was the only boy in the world* may break the rules, but it sounds perfectly natural.

But the key point here is that it's the subjunctive **mood**, not the subjunctive **case**. "Case" is a property of nouns (and associated categories like adjectives), not of verbs. If you're going to be an annoying prescriptive nag, at least don't be a terminologically ignorant annoying prescriptive nag.

(Mark Libermann, *Language Log*, <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languageelog/archives/001148.html>)

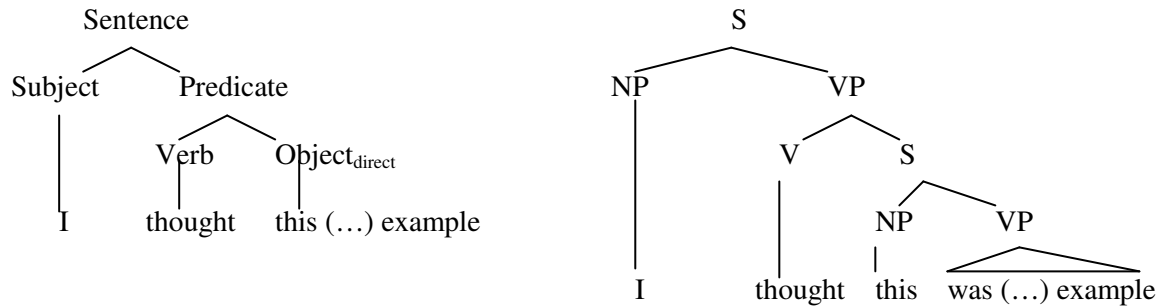
Discuss the role and importance of prescriptivism today in relation to this article (you may refer to Ch. 1 in B&B as well, and also to any other chapters/articles you may have about this issue, e.g. in LING 130). Can you think of other examples of prescriptivist attitudes? How common is it on the whole, would you say? In what social context(s) do we find it most frequently? How does it manifest itself? What are the arguments against it, linguistic and otherwise (e.g. social)? Can you think of any arguments *for* it?

2. Recall the discussion of the entity-action/event structure of propositions (thought) and the subject-predicate structure of sentences (well, clauses — well, most clauses in written English).

a. How would you divide up the sentence *One of the listener letters read on Here and Now today complained about some newscaster's failure to use "subjunctive case"* into central entity and event (i.e. what the central entity does, or what they undergo, etc.). What, therefore, are the subject and predicate of this sentence? Draw a tree diagram to represent this (you only need 2 branches).

b. Now do the same for *The Here and Now newsreader responded mildly "Oh, don't we all."*

3. What is the difference between the following two representations of the sentence *I thought this was an especially nice little example*



4. The sentence *I thought this was an especially nice little example of a correlation that might seem surprising* is actually quite complex in terms of its propositional structure. This is because it contains more than one proposition (entity-event combination). How many propositions does it consist of? Represent all of them in terms of a tree structure, labelling the central entity and the event it's involved in in the familiar way, i.e. as Subject and Predicate.

III. Linguistic analysis

In the lecture we saw how Yoda's language, despite the fact that it seems ungrammatical at first blush, actually follows the rules of English to quite a high degree. Download as much of his speech as possible from one or several Star Wars scripts (a good source for downloading film scripts is Drew's Scrip-O-Rama (<http://www.scrip-o-rama.com/snazzy/dircut.html>)) and investigate the degree to which it is (un)grammatical. In your analysis you should focus on questions like: Are all the normal elements (*subject, verb, perhaps direct object, indirect object, subject predicate* etc.) there or are some left out? Is the order of the elements normal or is it deviant? How exactly is it deviant? Is it always deviant in the same way?

I realise of course that at this stage it's still a bit hard to be totally accurate in your identification of subjects, direct objects, and so on — you'll get more confident as the module goes on — just do your best and see how you get on.

IV. Mini-investigation

This week's mini-investigation is about the linguistic phenomenon called *iconicity*. Recall how in class we saw that the (grammatical) structure of the English language (and indeed of any human language) mirrors in certain ways the structure of our thought. Iconicity, one might say, is an extreme manifestation of this correspondence, i.e. the term refers to cases where the structure of some bit of language (whether that be a word, a phrase, a sentence or some grammatical distinction such as singular vs. plural) somehow or other directly reflects the structure of the concept(s) that it describes. The purpose of this mini-investigation is to find out more about this phenomenon. Specifically, I'd like you to consider the following questions: What kinds of iconicity are there? What are examples of (the different kinds of) iconicity? (Here you'd ideally not just restrict yourself to what you find in the literature, but in addition you could try to come up with some examples of your own.) How important do you think iconicity is as a force that shapes the English language (or indeed any language)? Why do you think linguists have got increasingly interested in this phenomenon — especially after Ferdinand de Saussure (hint, hint!)? To find the relevant information you could consult e.g. one of the encyclopedias of linguistics (e.g. the brand spanking new one edited by Keith Brown (2006), which you can find in the library), or any of the books or articles written by John Haiman, who is kind of the Godfather of Iconicity (e.g. Haiman, John. 1980. *The iconicity of grammar: isomorphism and motivation*. *Language* 56:515-40 or Haiman, John. 1985. *Natural syntax: iconicity and erosion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). The following website has lots and lots of other useful references: <http://home.hum.uva.nl/iconicity/> (check under Iconicity, top left-hand side of the screen).