Hidden Finite, Fused Verbs – the Case for Linguistic Theory in Grammar Instruction

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ABSTRACT

The knowledge of the rules governing the structure of a language is undoubtedly a necessity for teachers as a basis for grammar instruction. However, teaching by the book—being able to articulate these 'grammatical rules' using standard terminology—does not necessarily mean understanding why the rule is the way it is. This paper posits that linguistic theory can promote a better understanding of how certain rules operate and thus aid teachers in explaining how these rules may be applied. For instance, a prescriptive rule in traditional grammar like "In a yes/no question, if there is an auxiliary verb, the auxiliary verb comes first, followed by the subject, then the main verb" can be explained through the role of the finite in Systemic-Functional Grammar. By manipulating the position of the finite, a proposition (statement) may be argued, i.e. it can be negated or questioned. The paper demonstrates how understanding the underlying linguistic concept can help a teacher to better explain negation and Yes/No questions, including structures involving the auxiliaries 'do' and 'did', which would otherwise be considered exceptions to the rules that require the learning of even more rules. The paper concludes that knowledge of linguistic theory in addition to knowing grammar rules is essential for effective grammar instruction.

KEYWORDS: approaches to grammar instruction, ESL, systemic-functional theory, teachers' content knowledge

Introduction

Grammar instruction is currently once again at the forefront of English Language Teaching in Malaysia, with the re-establishment of grammar as one of the components in the English Language syllabus for primary schools beginning in Year 3 (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013a, 2013b), a move which may possibly extend to the new syllabus for secondary schools as well. It is a fairly inarguable claim that the concept of grammar is known to any teacher and learner of a language, particularly the definition of grammar as a set of governing rules (where a prescriptivist stand is taken) or discernible regularities (if the stand is descriptivist) in language use. In terms of explicit focus on structure in language teaching methodology, it would appear that there is no definite agreement on the extent and type of grammar instruction in conventional approaches, as discussed in Myhill (2005), Nassaji and Fotos (2004, 2011), and Nunan (1998). Instead, there is a continuum that ranges from grammar-heavy methods such as Grammar-Translation to the communicative approach that downplays grammar instruction in the belief that grammatical competency would develop from using the language for authentic communication (Celce-Murcia, 2014).

Likewise, individual teachers undoubtedly have their personal beliefs and principles with regard to grammar instruction (for instance in Borg, 1998, 2008; Farrell & Lim, 2005; Shuib, 2009, among others). For teachers who choose explicit grammar instruction, whichever approach they favour, the knowledge of the rules or patterns in the structure of a language is undoubtedly a necessity. In order to translate this personal and intrinsic knowledge of structure rules or patterns, teachers also need to be able to articulate these rules or patterns in a form that can be accessed by learners. Traditionally, this involves the use of a metalanguage that is shared by both teacher and learners, wherein certain 'grammatical rules' couched in standardised terms are learnt and applied by learners. However, being able to articulate these rules does not necessarily mean understanding why the rule is the way it is. This paper posits that linguistic theory can promote a better understanding of how certain rules operate and thus aid teachers in explaining how these rules operate. In other words, it is suggested that while it is possible to teach grammar 'by the book' as the application of rules in language use, an understanding of linguistic theory—what makes a language work the way it does—can significantly enhance grammar instruction by teachers.

An example from Traditional Grammar

A basic rule in English grammar will be used to illustrate the argument being made in this paper: the use of the auxiliary verbs *do, does,* and *did*. This is typically explained in prescriptive form as a statement, for instance in the Collins Cobuild English Grammar (2012), which reads 'In a yes/no question, if there is an auxiliary verb, the auxiliary verb comes first, followed by the subject, then the main verb' (p. 245).

This rule may be illustrated with examples such as:

Auxiliary verb	*Subject*	*Verb phrase / Clause*
Do	you	like oranges?
Does	John	play the piano?
Did	Mary	take her medicine?

Another function of auxiliary verbs is to form negative statements, which may be explained thus. This is also as stated in the Collins Cobuild English Grammar (2012), 'When *not* is used with a verb phrase that contains an auxiliary verb, it comes after the first verb in the phrase' (p. 258).

Similarly, this may be illustrated by examples such as:

Subject	*Auxiliary verb*	*'Not'*	*Verb phrase / Clause*
I	do	not	like oranges.
John	does	not	play the piano.
Mary	did	not	take her medicine.

Making sense of and applying rules such as these is fairly unproblematic as long as a learner has the necessary knowledge of both grammatical (knowing what auxiliary verbs are) and syntactic (knowing what constitutes the subject) terminology. However, a common difficulty for learners with regard to auxiliaries is that structure-wise, auxiliaries are sometimes 'hidden' or 'fused' with another verb and thus may not be immediately visible in the statement, for example:

> *They like oranges* – the auxiliary do is 'hidden' within like, wherein 'like' is identical with its base form.
> *May took her medicine* – the auxiliary did is 'fused' with the verb in the irregular past tense form, 'took'.

To apply the rules given above, a learner would be told that there are 'exceptions to the rules' and that they would have to learn additional rules such as:

> For questions in the third person with singular subjects, start the yes/no question with *Does*; otherwise start with *Do*. In both cases, the main verb must be used in the base form.
> For questions in the past tense, start the question with *Did* and make sure the main verb is in the base form.

It can be seen that these further rules are likely to get increasingly more technical and complicated, and thus, in all probability much more intimidating to learners. Hence, as a medium for teaching and learning, using this kind of rules would tend to promote memorisation and mechanical repetition, which likely contributes to the notion that grammar is difficult to learn and even more difficult to teach. Following this, an alternative view of this same grammatical rule is provided, as an illustration of how an understanding of linguistic concepts can better serve as a basis for grammar instruction, rather than just an extensive knowledge of all the rules and exceptions to the rules in the English language.

An example from Systemic-Functional Grammar

The following alternative explanation of the form and function of the same auxiliary verbs (*do, does,* and *did*) is based on the Systemic-Functional linguistic theory. Conceptually, this is based on the idea that every clause conveys a proposition, that is, it proposes that something is true. The conceptualisation here is thus linguistic, not structural, in that every language has a means of arguing about the truth of a proposition. What differs from language to language is the semiotic device or structure that expresses this argument. As a very brief (and admittedly, simplistic) illustration, in the Malay language, a proposition concerning actions is argued by adding the negating element *tidak*, most commonly before the verb. Hence the proposition in *Saya suka buah oren* (I like oranges) is negated as *Saya <u>tidak</u> suka buah oren* (I don't like oranges). A similar device operates in Mandarin, wherein the negating element is *bù* (不) which is also placed before the verb concerned, as seen in the proposition 我回家(I'm going home) being negated as 我<u>不</u>回家 (I'm not going home).

In the English language, the proposition consists of the 'subject', which refers to "that of which something is being predicated (that is, on which rests the truth of the argument)" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 45) and the 'finite', which is defined as the element with the function of "making the proposition finite…so that it is something that can be argued about" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 115). Structure-wise, the subject is most commonly a noun phrase or nominal clause, whereas the finite is usually identified as an auxiliary verb or modal auxiliary in traditional grammar, referring to the various forms of *be, do,* and *have* as well as *can, might, should* and the like. By manipulating the finite, the proposition can be negotiated, whether to question its veracity (Is it true?), modify the degree of its accuracy (To what extent is it true?), or to negate the proposition altogether (It is completely false).

The operation of the finite may be explained as follows. To begin with, there is a finite in every clause or simple sentence, and in simple terms, if we wish to argue about the proposition being made in a clause, we do so through the finite that the clause contains. Hence, the proposition in a non-finite verb phrase (without a finite) cannot be argued with. For example, in the sentence *She has been going to Kuala Lumpur*, the argument over the proposition involves only the finite—in this case, the auxiliary *has*—and not the main or lexical verb *go*. Hence, to modify the proposition, the finite is manipulated, whether to query (*Has she been going to Kuala Lumpur?*) or negate (*She has not been going to Kuala Lumpur*) the proposition. However, in the non-finite phrase *her having gone to Kuala Lumpur*, there is no proposition made and hence, there is nothing to query or negate.

One structural characteristic of finites is that they are sometimes 'hidden' or 'fused' with the main or lexical verb. Often, the lexical verb shows signs that it is 'hiding' a finite through the bound inflectional morphemes 's/es' and 'ed' (including irregular past tense forms), but the lexical verb may also appear identical to the base form when the finite concerned is 'do' or if the verb has a zero-morpheme past tense form. Here, the principle of Subject-Verb agreement is also relevant, in that different finites pair with different types of subject. Subsequently, learners may be informed that one main reason for having these finites is to enable us to talk about whether the idea contained in a statement is true (in the case of Yes/No questions and negation), which is a concept- or function-based explanation. In other words, the finites help to form questions and form negatives. Hence, the finite is placed before the subject to signal that the truth of the statement is being questioned, and negation is signalled by placing 'not' after the finite. In order for the finite to play its role, it needs to be separated from the lexical verb, which explains why the lexical verb returns to its base form in questions and negative statements.

Using the same examples from earlier on, the explanation given above may be applied thus. In the statement, *John plays the piano*, the helper *does* is hidden within the lexical verb *plays*, as indicated by the inflectional morpheme *–s* that is attached to *play*. To discuss whether the proposition is true, the helper *does* is separated from *plays* to begin a yes/no question (*Does John play the piano?*), and the lexical verb returns to its base form. If the proposition is untrue, then the helper 'holds up' the signal word *not* to form the negative statement *John does not play the piano*; the lexical verb likewise returns to its base form. A similar operation is seen for the statement *Mary took her medicine*, in which the helper *did* is fused with the lexical verb *take* to form an irregular past tense form. The same basic operation is likewise applicable for the statement *I like oranges*, except that there is no overt sign that the helper *do* is hiding in the lexical verb *like*.

In explaining these basic patterns to learners, a teacher may choose not to use standard grammatical terminology but alternatives such as 'helping word' for auxiliaries, wherein the hidden and fused auxiliaries may be referred to as 'shy' helpers. If the role of the finite is properly understood conceptually, then it should be clear that the finites have not disappeared or become redundant, because the finite is still playing an active role functionally or conceptually even though it may no longer be observable. The conceptualisation thus remains sound because a concept- or function-based explanation addresses the different structural forms in which the finite is expressed, as opposed to the 'exception to the rule' explanation discussed earlier.

Other functions of the finite

In Systemic-Functional grammar, the function of the finite with regard to the truth of the proposition is not just limited to questions and negation, but extends to the degree of veracity as well. This is accomplished through modal auxiliaries functioning as finites, for instance *Can John come to the party?* or *Should I call her?* Similarly, when the truth of the proposition is modified with adverbs, the adverb is found nearest to the finite rather than the lexical verb, as in *John may possibly be coming to the party* (and not *John may be coming possibly to the party*) or *You definitely should have called her earlier* (and not *You should have definitely called her earlier*.)

Furthermore, the finite also plays a role in explaining the mood system in English grammar, wherein the position of the finite relative to the subject determines the mood of a clause, identifying it as declarative (subject before finite), interrogative (finite before subject), or imperative (finite without subject). An interesting point here is that the imperative mood prevents argument with the proposition by leaving out the finite, hence there is no negotiation possible. Comparing the declarative *We will leave right now* and the imperative *Leave*, it is apparent that the former is more open to argument than the latter, since the declarative can be modified directly (*We will not leave right now*) but it is impossible to argue with the imperative without coming up with a new proposition. The choice of mood is thus closely related to discourse, in that choosing the relevant mood can either open up negotiation or block it. Taking the concept of the finite even further, the role of the finite in determining mood is also related to politeness, in that using a mood that is congruent with its speech function is seen as less polite than using an incongruent mood. Hence, *Check my essay* with its congruent or typical combination of the imperative mood for a request is deemed less polite than *Could you check my essay?* with its incongruent combination of a request and the interrogative mood.

Based on the examples provided thus far, it should be apparent that the concept of the finite in Systemic-Functional theory is a fundamental principle that underlies the language system as a whole. Thus, a strong grasp of this concept can prove invaluable to language teachers with regards to teaching the language system, that is, grammar. By this point in the discussion, it may be noted that in this particular paper the grammar being touted, so to speak, is Systemic-Functional grammar. It should be noted that the focus of this paper is not to compare different grammars with an object of identifying which is in whatever way 'better' than others as a basis for grammar instruction. Nevertheless, in this writer's opinion, there are at least at least two strong reasons why Systemic-Functional grammar is suitable for this role. Firstly, it is well established as the basis for English language instruction, notably in Australia (see, for instance Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks, & Yallop (2000); Humphrey, Droga, & Feez (2012); Humphrey, Love, & Droga (2011); and Thompson (2004). Secondly, it hinges on functions rather than structures, as traditional grammatical rules do. Hence grammar is understood in terms of how linguistic resources are applied to convey a particular meaning for a particular communicative

function (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Martin & Rose, 2008). Another way of looking at this is that traditional grammar is concerned with identifying the structural patterns in a language and categorising actual instances of language according to those structural patterns, whereas Systemic-Functional grammar is concerned not only with structural patterns but how a particular function in and of language can be expressed through different structural forms for different contexts and purposes. Systemic-Functional grammar is thus well-suited for the Malaysian English Language syllabus which is generally communicative in nature and hence closely related to the use of language for various functions (Ho & Sriniwass, 2012).

Conclusion

Summing up the discussion, it is believed that understanding the linguistic theory underlying how grammatical rules function is important because it allows us to see how a particular rule works as well as how different aspects of the language are interconnected, as illustrated in the examples in the previous section, wherein a simple concept such as the finite may be linked to the exchange of goods and services (through finites in the mood system), addressor and addressee roles and relationships (through modal auxiliaries as finites), and even appropriateness of register (through the role of finites in determining mood and politeness). Metaphorically, it enables us to see the forest (the language system as a whole) rather than a succession of trees (individual rules). This understanding then serves as a base of pedagogical content knowledge for the teacher to formulate explanations and devise systematic approaches to the presentation, practice and application of grammar rules. In other words, it is felt that teaching based on a systematic and comprehensive conceptual understanding of how grammar rules work is superior to teaching grammatical rules 'according to the book', regardless of how creatively the rules are presented or what interesting and fun activities are used to practice them.

It is acknowledged that the application of linguistic theory in grammar instruction is not a fool proof method to ensure accuracy of language use among learners. The ideas put forward in this paper are not meant to replace the basic principle of promoting accuracy through sufficient practice in context. It is also undoubtedly true that Systemic-Functional Grammar makes use of terminology just as traditional grammar does; nevertheless it is not the intention of this paper to call for the abolition of terminology in grammar instruction. The stand taken here is that in order for language teachers to be reflective practitioners, their practice should be informed by theory, and theory should in turn be applied to continually enhance practice. Hence, it is hoped that this short illustration of linguistic theory being applied practically would encourage language teachers to continue to hone their pedagogical content knowledge in the interests of effective practice.

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