

## Grammar rules

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### Abstract

This paper described the concept of grammar, the knowledge and its usefulness in language use. It harped on the assumptions of the theory of competence and performance – the linguistic knowledge of a language and the use of this knowledge in concrete and different situations. Samples of the prescriptive grammatical rules of English used in sentences were given and types of sentences both according to structure and function also given to justify that it is grammar that governs all the activities related to language and language use. The paper noted that grammar is to a language, what a constitution is to a nation or that grammar does to a language what a football referee does to players in a football contest. And therefore, concludes that grammar is a mirror of language; it is a place to be and look at language.

**Keywords:** grammar, competence, performance, linguistics, language, rules

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 This article begins with these intriguing questions

1. What is language?
2. What is grammar?
3. Can language exist without grammar?
4. What is the relationship between language and grammar?

The questions are usual ones in linguistics corridor which every language learner or a beginner-linguist is faced with and which he/she must answer if he/she must be successful. I must acknowledge that the questions are not easy to answer because of their complex nature. There complexities make them open to different possible answers, interpretations and readings from different angles. The expressed missed feelings notwithstanding, the researcher will be very simplistic and give workable answers to them. For me, language is simply a means of communication. It is the use of semiotic symbols, signs, and interpretable sounds for interaction and communication. The researcher defines grammar as the conventionally defined rules that govern the use of language. It is the interpretable rules and codes which explain how language is to be used. Can language exist without grammar, I simply answer in the negative. Language is made up of different, parts and layers; it is grammar that defines how the different parts can be combined in an acceptable linguistic form. The common relationship between language and grammar is symbiotic. One cannot exist nor have any conceivable form without the other. Linguistic grammar is operational and conceivable in language. Language on its own cannot exist without grammar; it will appear as streams of unorganized symbols and noisy sounds. It is grammar that streamlines or arranges different forms of semiotic signs into one conceivable linguistic unit called language. Their relationship is just symbiotic.

### 2. Reviews

#### 2.1 The review is done under the following subheadings

- a. Theoretical Orientation,

- b. Conceptual Orientation and Description of Samples of Grammar Rules

#### 2.2 Theoretical Orientation

The work is hinged on the theory of competence and performance. This is a linguistic theory that describes the knowledge of a native speaker of a language or a language user and his/her actual use of language. According to Chomsky (1965) <sup>[1]</sup> competence is a speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language. It is the body of the knowledge of system of rules internalized subconsciously by a native speaker. Competence is also grammatically called grammar. This is because the rules about a language possess by a native cut across all the components of language, and grammar on its own is everything about the tacit concrete rules of a language (Radford, 1997; Nwala, 2004; 2016) <sup>[7]</sup>. Chomsky (1966) <sup>[2]</sup> recognized two types of competence: grammatical or linguistic and pragmatic competence. Grammatical competence is the knowledge and ability of the native speaker, which he uses to produce or generate sentences." It is the theory of the language structure" (1966, p.11). The pragmatic competence is the theory of language use. Radford (1987) <sup>[9]</sup> noted that pragmatic competence describes the roles played by non-linguistic factors. It is the ability of one to use language appropriately in different context.

The second aspect of the theory, performance, is the actual use of language in different situation. It is generally seen as competence in action. Performance does not include only directly observable utterances, spoken or written, but also the speaker's use of language to manifest his thought, (Horrocks, 1987) <sup>[3]</sup>. Performance is the concrete aspect of the tacit knowledge of a language user. This is because it brings out the cognitive component of language in the form of speech, and through it, competence can be roughly mirrored or examined.

The researcher resorted to the use of this theory because it falls within the confines of the aim of the paper. The issue of grammar rules centres on the knowledge of the rules of the language, rules that are followed or rules that must be

mastered for one to make acceptable constructions. So, the theory of competence and performance or *la langue* and *la parole* as used by Ferdinand de Saussure is one that describes what one must know about language and how one must use language in different contexts.

### 2.3 Conceptual Orientation and Description

This topic has a dual interpretation. In one instance, it could be used to mean that it is grammar that rules, defines, detects and governs all language related issues. Here, grammar is seen as a sort of binding rules and ground norms of language, which directs the activities, roles, functions and behaviour of people who use language. Grammar in this token is what people must resort to in their use of language and which should be used to ascertain the correctness and acceptability of whatever expression that is made by people. This is the general order many people conceive grammar. The ancient and traditional grammarians saw grammar from this perspective; hence, they described how people should use language (Nwala, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. The traditional grammarians who were prescriptive in nature believed that language is rigidly rule-governed, and to use language, one must obey the laid down rules. Ndimele (1999)<sup>[6]</sup> attested to this when he noted that grammar legislates and works against unguided language use. A common thing we must take home from this angle of the description of the topic is that grammar is that which teaches us how to express ourselves with propriety in language; and also enables us to judge phrases and constructions whether they are right or not. It enables us choose the words which should be used, and to place them where they should be. It is purist in nature and places constraints on language. Nwala (2004)<sup>[7]</sup> summarily captured grammar rules in his opinion that grammar is the body of rules that govern the use of language.

Some common rules of this form of grammar enunciated by the traditional grammarians are:

1. do not begin a sentence with the conjunction because
2. do not end a sentence with a preposition
3. do not split the infinitive
4. do not use will after the 1<sup>st</sup> person when expressing futurity
5. do not use double negative
6. do not use accusative form of the pronoun (e.g. me) after the verbs
7. do not use the accusative form of the pronoun (e.g. me) when making a comparison, or the word, then.

### 2.4 Following the stance of the traditional grammarians, then, the following sentences are unacceptable

1. Because Mary is beautiful, I love her
2. Mike is a nice guy to go out with
3. I was asked to also look for Jane
4. She didn't do nothing
5. I will go to school tomorrow
6. I hope it were me
7. Joy is as good as me or Joy is better than me

These ideas of the traditional grammarians have been overtaken by linguistic revolution of language use with the dawn of the descriptive and modern grammar. The Descriptive grammar is one that simply guides and describes how people should use language and what people should do using language. Apart from the anachronistic grammar rules of the ancient Greek and traditional

grammarians, there are common grammar rules, such as:

1. Use active voice
2. Link ideas with conjunction
3. Use a comma to connect two ideas or two objects
4. Use serial comma in a list
5. Use the semicolon to join two ideas
6. Use the simple present tense for habitual action
7. Use the present progressive tense for current action
8. Add the morpheme –ed to verbs for past tense
9. A noun name things, persons and places
10. A pronoun is used to replace the noun
11. A verb shows action and when event took place
12. An adjective modifies a noun or a pronoun
13. An adverb modifies a verb, adjective and an adverb
14. A sentence is partitioned into subject and predicate
15. A sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a period
16. There must be an agreement between the subject and the verb
17. There must be an agreement between the pronoun and its antecedent
18. The mechanics must be used to show breaks and psychological dispositions

These rules and many more not mentioned here enhance acceptable and coherent language use. What is different between these modern grammar rules and those of the ancient grammar rules is flexibility. Another possible meaning of the title related to the foregoing is that there are indeed grammatical rules of language which do not necessarily govern the behaviour of language users, but are part of the language which show how language is, the nature of language and the interconnectivity of the layers or levels of language. The rules are like different theories that are used to study language and to show the internal structure of the different layers of language. Here, we can basically talk about phonetic and phonological rules – which define the sounds of human language generally called phonemes (the meaningful, contrastive and distinctive sounds) and the patterning of these sounds in line with different languages. We have the morphological rules which use as its input the identifiable phonemes of a language to form words. They are rules that show the formation of words or the internal structure of words.

The third is the syntactic rules – those that govern the arrangement or the putting together of words to form phrases and sentences. These rules make possible the formation of different forms and types of sentences – those according to structure:

1. Simple sentence
2. Complex sentence
3. Compound sentence
4. Compound complex sentence
5. Multiple sentence

### 2.5 And those according to function

1. Declarative sentence
2. Explanatory sentence
3. Interrogative sentence
4. Imperative sentence

The grammar rules also show the interpretation of phrases and sentences called semantic rules. The rules guide the selection of words from the lexicon, providing the correct

frames for their combination and making sure that the words to be put in the phrase marker are compactible and can indeed go together. Finally, grammar rules also guide the choices of words and phrases and expressions language speakers make in different contexts. This rule, called pragmatic rule, views or interprets constructions from the users' viewpoint (Nwala 2004; Nwala 2016)<sup>[7, 8]</sup>.

Grammar rules also provide different grammatical theories which promote effective learning and interpretation of words and sentences. These theories such as, the generative phonology, distinctive feature, lexical phonology, metrical phonology, auto-segmental phonology, optimality theory, structuralism, transformational generative grammar, government and binding grammar, minimalist programme, systemic functional grammar, referential theory, truth conditional theory, contrastive analysis, speech act theory, conversational implicature, critical discourse analysis among many others are different grammatical approaches used to analyze and interpret language. They provide different systematic approaches at different language levels which direct language users. They serve as theoretical designs which provide roadmaps for linguistic analysis.

Looking at the foregoing interpretation of grammar rule- an interpretation with a falling tune ( \ ) – one that should go with the third person concord to show or to bring out the real linguistic effect of the meaning (grammar rules), it is glaring that grammar indeed rules language, language use and language users. Mbah (2011)<sup>[5]</sup>, Mbah (2016)<sup>[5]</sup> and Eyisi (2006)<sup>[2]</sup> in different but related descriptive explanations, captured what grammar is and does. It is the rules of a language, which govern the sounds, words, sentences and other elements, as well as their combinations and interpretations. It is the totality of the comprehensive language structure and a raw material for communication within and across human cultures (Mbah 2011)<sup>[4]</sup>. For Eyisi (2006)<sup>[2]</sup>, grammar is the way a language manipulates and combines words (or bits of words) to form units of meaning. It is the set of rules that govern how units of meaning may be constructed in any language; it is that which defines one who has mastered his language and can apply the rules to express himself in acceptable forms.

The second meaning of the title, grammar rule also goes with the third person concord agreement marker –s. It simply shows or means that grammar is what rules or governs a language. The second reading of the title takes a rising tune ( / ); it means that it is grammar that defines and governs the use of language. From the general studies of communication skills in language, one sees grammar in action in all facets of language use. Communication or any of the language skills cannot take place when words and morphemes used in sentences are not well-formed and structured. To be competent in a language first of all means that one must be at home with the grammatical rules of the language, the rules will help one to form acceptable constructions; be able to define acceptable (well-formed) constructions and unacceptable (ill-formed) constructions. This is very similar to what happens in social organizations, where members know by heart the dos and don'ts of the association and must conform to the rules in their behaviour or get sanctioned.

Grammar prepares the recipe that guides language practitioners. It shows what to do with language at every time; when to use a word, a phrase and a sentence. Grammar is to language users what constitution is to a nation and

organization. Remove a constitution a nation is bound to collapse, there will be total anarchy, a situation of total breakdown or shut down of the nation; in the same vain, remove grammar, there will be no language. Grammar is the support system of language (Nwala, 2016)<sup>[8]</sup>, the dress code of language, in fact, grammar is language.

Grammar does to language what a central referee does to a football match. A referee is like a demi-god, who runs around in a football match. He or she directs or controls the activities of the players, takes decision which the players must obey. The referee defines when a football is out of touch, when a player is either offside or onside, when there is an infringement; when there is a free kick, when someone commits a foul etc. He or she cautions and sanctions the players when necessary; he/she may caution a player with a yellow card and can absolutely terminate a player from the field of play on account of disobedience to the rules of the game. In like manner, grammar watches over the actions of language users. It provides the rules and directs the usage of linguistic items in sentences. It sanctions users who do not conform to the tenets and dictates of the rules. Expressions that are not in line with the grammar of a language are judged ill-formed and unacceptable. Such expressions may be tautologous, ambiguous, anomalous and even meaningless. Grammar is a language checker. It shows for example when the rules of concord are broken, when there is no agreement between the pronoun and its antecedent; it shows the tense that depicts if action of events is either wrongly used or inconsistent. Grammar shows when mechanics are wrongly placed, used or not used at all; grammar shows when and where to use conjunction and also the type to be used. To say the least, grammar does the work of an architect, which designs and builds a language. Grammar indeed rules.

### 3. Conclusion

So far, the researchers have explicitly shown that the expression “grammar rules” has a dual semantic citizenship and also dual phonological sound effects. As that which has a dual semantic citizenship, it could mean specifiable, identifiable or describable rules of language; it could also in the other hand, mean that which legislates and checks language use and the behaviour of language users in different context. In which ever form one looks at grammar, it is at the centre of language. The English language cannot be used without grammar in focus: the formations of words, phrases and sentences are not possible without grammar; the interpretations of the words, phrases and sentences of English are not possible without grammar; grammar is the mirror of language; it is a place to be and look at language, it is a truism that grammar rules.

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