

Language and Mind
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Module – 02
Lecture - 08
Grammar = Mental Grammar

Today, we will talk about the term grammar. And in that context, I would like you to understand that, every time we talk about grammar, we actually mean mental grammar. And, we will try to understand the term mental grammar as well with respect to grammar. In a study of language, this is an important concept. A clarity regarding the terms like grammar and mental grammar is very crucial in order to understand language, the study of language and its implications for the study of human mind, and in turn, relationship between language and mind. What is it that we mean by the term grammar and mental grammar? I am not sure if you have heard these terms before. And, when I say you may not have heard this term before, I particularly mean mental grammar. Of course, I do not imply all of you; I am sure some of you may have heard this by now. Let us understand these terms. If you wish, you can pause for a moment and think what does the term grammar mean to you? It is not very complicated; I am sure everybody has heard the term grammar.

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Grammar

- Grammar (in general) means 'a set of rules'.
- It helps us learn to speak and maintain norms of polite society.
- Violation of grammar is like violation of social norms (like spitting in public).
- Helps us understand 'proper' grammar.
 - We do not have any pens. (acceptable, grammatical)
 - We ain't got no pens. (unacceptable, ungrammatical)

It means a set of rules; it means that... It means a lot of things. Most importantly, it is a set of rules. The moment we talk about grammar, idea of a book comes to our mind and we are all familiar with at least in our context; and, in this context of India, we have gone through learning of English, and each one of us must have seen a grammar of English. I am sure a lot of us have seen grammars of Hindi and various other languages too. So, what does that book mean? And, as a side note, in some cases, this is also known as one of the monotonous books; it does not interest people when... It basically means an uninteresting book. We will not get into those things.

Coming back to the discussion on grammar, it means the rules that we need to know in order to learn a language. And, we look at chapters, we look at various terms, we look at rules, and then we try to apply, generalize and learn language. But, there are some of other things that are associated with the term grammar that we should know. It also helps us learn to speak and maintain norms of polite society. You may have heard things like this is not grammatical, this is not how we say, this is not how it is said. These are loaded terms. And, lot of times, when we say such things, we mean that we are probably not maintaining the norms of quote unquote polite society. I will give you examples to understand the terms. I will use examples from English but, I invite you to come up with examples from languages that you speak for you to check what these things mean in the context of our languages.

A violation of grammar, that is, grammatical rule is like violation of societal norms. What are the social norms that we are familiar with? I mean I can give you two examples. One is like spitting in public. We know that, spitting in public is not a good manner. In the same context, we also know when it is important to listen to people and it is not polite to keep talking all the times, particularly when others are talking. So, these are societal norms. And, like we would want to conform to social norms, we would also like to be grammatical to maintain what and how things should be said. Also, grammar helps us understand proper terms. So, grammatical also means proper.

Let us look at an example. In some variety of English, let us look at the second sentence first; we ain't got no pens – this is a perfectly acceptable sentence in some variety of English. However, no grammar book will confirm that this is grammatical. All of them will maintain the ungrammatical nature of this sentence. And, in turn, they will suggest that, the way it should be said properly - the first one is also a grammatical sentence; it

should be - We do not have any pens. Basically, grammar means proper language. And, I will also talk about these terms little later. But, let us understand this in the context of some examples.

So, the first sentence – we do not have any pens, is a proper sentence, is a proper language, is proper example from language English. All grammar books will confirm to the acceptability and grammaticality of this sentence. However, in some variety of English, we find sentences like, we ain't got no pens; and, no grammar will confirm that this is a grammatical sentence; no grammar will allow the acceptability of this sentence. Again, the moment we say unacceptable, ungrammatical, we mean this is not proper language. So, these are some of the characteristics of the term grammar, which will be helpful for us to understand. And, as you see, what I said in the beginning that, grammar in general is a set of rules and something that does not conform to those rules are not proper, not proper language; and, this is, in a way general understanding of the term grammar. This is actually very loose understanding of the term grammar.

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Mental Grammar

- The study of language in general and the structure of language in particular helps us explore the notion of Mental Grammar which in turn is the most significant development in the study of language and mind.
- Mental Grammar is a theoretical construct.
- It refers to a specific capacity.
- The capacity to recognize/make ALL patterns of language.

In the study of language, every time we use the term grammar, we mean mental grammar. And, I would like you to focus on this one for us to understand what we mean by mental grammar. So, see the study of the structure of language in particular helps us explore the notion of the term mental grammar; which in turn is one of the most significant developments in the study of language and mind. So, for us, when we are

trying to understand language and mind, language in mind, the role of human mind in understanding language, in learning language, in acquiring language – for all these contexts, it is important for us to understand the concept of mental grammar. And, I will try to bring in some of the things that I have discussed before in this context for us to understand the term mental grammar as well. So, please pay attention to the term, to the phrase again, when I say structure of language and the study of language.

Study of language may include various aspects of language. But, one of the particular aspects in the study of language is the study of the structure of language. The study of the structure of language has a lot to talk about or to substantiate the notion of mental grammar. And, we will talk about that as well. We will be focusing a lot on the study of the structure of language for us to understand the bigger phenomenon of language and mental grammar; in turn the role of human mind in language. So, in the study of language, mental grammar is a theoretical term. It has theoretical implications. And, it refers to a specific capacity. We have used the term generative capacity. A generative capacity is... And, the capacity of human mind is really what makes mental grammar. And, this capacity, which is your mental grammar, recognizes all patterns of language; that is, underlying patterns of language.

Now, the term pattern is very important. You have seen the use of the term set of rules when we were understanding grammar. And, when we are trying to understand mental grammar, the critical term is pattern. So, the distinction is a set of rules have underlying patterns. So, a mental grammar is a step deeper, which is the underlying pattern of the set of rules. In other words, we can also say underlying patterns of language. So, mental grammar includes the capacity to recognize patterns. And, this is what is actually the definition of the term - mental grammar.

Now, let us look at the two sentences that we have mentioned while trying to understand grammar. The two sentences belong to two different varieties of English. We do not have any pens - is a sentence in quote unquote standard English; and, the sentence – we ain't have got no pens, is a sentence from one of the varieties of English. It is also known as vernacular English; it is also known as African American vernacular English; and then, there are lots of other names. Now, how does the term, the concept of mental grammar helps us understand these two sentences? According to the notion of grammar, the

second one is ungrammatical, unacceptable. According to the notion of mental grammar, we wanted to say – the two sentences have two different grammars.

And therefore, the two sentences belong to two different languages; to the least, it helps us understand the notion of variety and accepting the grammaticality of the sentence from African-American vernacular English, and the idea that there could be two different grammars, there could be two different languages, we would need to recognize these two different varieties of English. This applies to the distinction between language and variety, language and dialect, in general. We will be talking about language and variety very soon in little bit more details.

So, once again, to summarize the two terms, the two sentences can be better understood by the term mental grammar. And so, what is it that makes the sentence, we ain't have got no pens, unacceptable and ungrammatical? The standard... The set of rules of standard English, following the grammar of the standard English says we cannot have two negatives. And then, there are more to that. Whereas, mental grammar helps us understand that, some variety would accept application of two negatives in a sentence and will be acceptable. So with this, we come to some of more terms that are going to be helpful.

So far, we have seen two terms: grammatical and acceptable. Let us elaborate little bit on this. We call a sentence or a phrase or a combination of words grammatical when it conforms to the rules and it conforms to the pattern. Then, it is grammatical. However, whether or not it is acceptable, is a social idea. And, at this stage, you will be able to see that, some sentences could be grammatical, but not acceptable. However, some sentences are acceptable, but may not be grammatical. However, at this point, when we say ungrammatical, we will have to check and see if it is acceptable by a large number of speakers. Then probably, we are looking at a different pattern. And, since it conforms to a different pattern, we probably are talking about a different mental grammar. Therefore, it is possible that, a sentence is grammatical, but not acceptable. But, it is highly unlikely that, we will have a sentence, which is unacceptable, but will be grammatical.

Now, let us look at an example, which will help us understand grammaticality and acceptability. There are lot of sentences; there is a very famous sentence in the study of language, which has been quoted million times in order to understand this point – this

particular point. This was used in aspects of syntax. The sentence is - colorless green ideas sleep furiously. Now, this sentence is very strange; it does not mean much; it is not coherent in the sense that, ideas cannot be colorless or colorful; ideas cannot be... And, if it is colorful, it cannot be green or red or anything... The sentence is colorless green ideas sleep furiously. Now, if something is colorless, it cannot be green. And, on the top of everything, ideas are not either colorful or colorless. Sleep furiously – ideas do not sleep or awake. And then, if it does not sleep, if it does not get up; then, there is no question of furious or furiously. Now, from all possible angles, this sentence does not tell us much.

However, the sentence is grammatical. Nobody will put this sentence ungrammatical in English. We can take many other sentences like - a dog is reading a newspaper, I saw a building walking. These are all grammatical sentences, but they do not mean much. In other words, they are grammatical, but not acceptable. However, acceptability is a term, which comes from society and there are lot of other things which might play a role in acceptability. We will look at them as well.

So, now, let us understand the discussion on acceptability and grammaticality in the context of grammar and mental grammar. I hope a lot of things are clear already, but I will put them as summary as follows. Grammaticality is an important concept; it is related to pattern. And, in the study of language and in particularly in the study of the structure of language, when we say grammatical, we mean conforming to the patterns. And, this pattern becomes very significant for us to understand learning.

Remember, we have mentioned it before that, learning involves recognizing patterns; and, recognizing patterns is what is always underway when the process of learning is taking place. And, this is what helps us claim that, learning is not learning individual sentences or individual words or phrases; learning is recognizing patterns and the capacity to... – the capacity to recognize such patterns for the capacity to add and combine words and phrases together. And, that is generative capacity.

Now, see the connection between the role of mental grammar, learning and generative capacity. All these things together help us understand the study of language, help us understand what involves in learning of language.

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Mental Grammar

- Competence
- I - Language
- Form
- Innateness
- E-language

So, there are a couple of terms like competence that we have seen. Competence in short... the term is actually linguistic competence; so this refers to the capacity of recognizing patterns and mental grammar. I-language refers to the same idea; that is, we have seen this term internal language and it means the language that is in mind. In other words, underlying patterns, set of rules, universal grammar – all these things are part of I-language. Form – it is a much looser term, which combines both competence and I-language. And, such a capacity is also called innate capacity. So, the whole idea of innateness is swiftly, effortlessly, quietly recognizing pattern; and, that capacity – such a capacity is innate. And, this will help us understand the term innateness.

Now, I am bringing in a term E-language, which I have mentioned couple of times; but, here I would like to let you know that, E-language refers to external language and it refers to the capacity, the use of language. The ability to use language, which will be related to acceptability and appropriateness – all these things are part of E-language. And, at one point, we will be looking at relationship and in particular, differences between E-language and I-language – the idea of E-language and I-language. And then, we will see that the underlying rules of E-language are in a way part of I-language. Jackendoff and Pinker, Chomsky and many others have discussed this faculty of language in a narrow sense. Probably such an idea will include this, what we have just mentioned; that a discussion on E-language is actually part of I-language. We will discuss these things to understand it further. Thank you.