Language as a system

Unit 4: Discourse

Unit 4. Discourse

Competence: Identify the main differences between spoken and written texts, and the different types of discourse.

Presentation

In this unit, we will explore some other aspects that grammar implies, including its definition. We will also look at the differences between spoken and written discourses and the importance of the context in which discourses appear to transmit a message with an intended meaning.

To be assessed in this unit, you will have to send on due time the portfolio activities, participate in forum discussions, and include your insights on the unit topic in a short essay.

Introduction

There are several misconceptions of grammar, and although it can be defined according to different perspectives, it is important to differentiate what grammar is mistakenly believed to be from what grammar really is. We cannot attempt to teach grammar to our students if we are not aware of what grammar actually involves and implies. In the same way, it is important to highlight the differences between spoken and written discourses, as this has an impact on the way the language is used, and therefore, on its grammar.

Although grammar is usually regarded as a different language aspect from semantics, language is structured in one way or another because it is meanings that we want to convey. Therefore, grammar has a very close relationship with semantics, as we have to consider not only the meaning, but the different meanings that a given structure has depending on its function and context in which it is used.

Getting started

✎   Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

4.1 What is a grammar?

There are several ways to look at grammar, but some of them are actually common misconceptions. Nevertheless, it is not always easy do to determine what is a misconception and what is an accurate perception of grammar. There will usually be room for discussion regarding this matter.

Let's take the statements in the Getting started activity as an example. When analyzing the statement 'A grammar of a language is a book written about it' we find that although "a book about grammar" can be called "a grammar", it cannot be said that grammar reduces to being 'a book'. However, the assertion 'the rules or patterns presented in good, modern grammar books constitute to a great extent the grammar of a language' is actually an acknowledged way to look at grammar. In fact, it is one way which turns out to be very useful for teachers, because they can base their explanations of the language on the rules that these books present. This 'kind of grammar' is known as prescriptive, because it establishes what can be said or written.

Thus, the statement 'Grammar is something that can be good or bad, correct or incorrect' does not sound out of the question. If there are certain rules that dictate what can be said or not, there are certain language uses that are correct and some that are incorrect. However, it is actually society and the specific context in which language is used that establish what to accept and what not to. Therefore, the same language instance could be correct or not depending on the circumstances. In the end, 'good' or 'bad', 'correct' or 'incorrect' are very subjective labels.

In this way, in terms of real language usage, another way to look at grammar is from a descriptivist perspective. The statement that exemplifies this perspective is 'The language rules or patterns underlying the discourse of a speech community can be considered as the grammar of their language.' This is a descriptive perspective because it relies on observing how the language is actually being used to establish generalizations about the language structure and its patterns.

If the use that native speakers, usually the educated ones, give to their language is where the grammar of the language comes from, therefore the statement 'The grammar of the language is found only in the written language' is false. Native speakers, belonging to a speech community, do not limit themselves to speak. They obviously also use the written means to communicate to each other. Actually, there are very specific conventions both regarding spoken and written texts in the different speech communities part of a society of native speakers of a language.

It is true, though, that written texts tend to be more formal and strict with respect to the use of the language. This is one of the characteristics that differentiate written from spoken language.

But this topic will be seen in more detailed in the following section.But this topic will be seen in more detailed in the following section.

There is still another perspective from which to look at grammar. This is expressed through the statements 'Grammar is the intuitive language rules or patterns in fluent users' heads' and 'Grammar is the set of rules and principles native speakers use in producing and understanding their language.' This is a more abstract perspective of grammar known as mental grammar. This kind of grammar is mostly acquired by native speakers when they are children, and it becomes something intuitive for them to use the language.

Therefore, the statement 'Some people know the grammar of their language, others do not' is not true. What is true is that some people may not use the conventions established by the members of their speech communities in certain contexts, or that some people do not use the language established in the good, modern grammar books of their language. These people may be judged as 'ignorant', but only of some of the rules, patterns or conventions of the language.

So far, grammar has been conceived as a set of rules and patterns regarding the use of the language, whether in people's heads or in books. But what does grammar entail? The answer to this question is in the statement 'Grammar involves the study of the syntax and morphology of sentences.' In the previous unit we looked at syntax as the part of grammar that establishes the order of words in a sentence. But words themselves have an internal grammar and can take different forms, as we saw in unit 2 when discussing word formation. This aspect of grammar is precisely morphology, which refers to the structure of words.

Even if words are arranged correctly to form a sentence, if they do not present the corresponding form, the sentence is not considered correct. Therefore, the grammar of a language, broadly speaking, comprises the grammar of sentences, that is, syntax, and the grammar of words, that is, morphology. For this reason, the statement 'Some languages have grammar, others do not' cannot be considered true. Some languages may lack of morphology, or the morphology they imply is very little, but they still follow certain rules to put words together in order to communicate, so they do have grammar.

Read the directions and do **Activity 1. LAS 401 Types of grammar** in the corresponding section on Eminus.

Activity 2. LAS 402 Parts of grammar. Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

Forum Grammar

Go back to the **Getting Started** activity, do it again and save it as a PDF file. Compare your answers with your first file. Then, go to the forum "**Activity 3. LAS 403 Grammar**" when indicated and comment on your answers for the **Getting started** activity and **LAS 401** and **LAS 402**.

4.2 Spoken vs written discourse

Evidently, even if we are talking about the same language, there are differences between its spoken and its written 'versions'. It is not really that there are two versions of the same language; it is just that there are two means to use the language to communicate. Spoken and written language do have similarities, for instance, they both use the same language system; but in this section we will focus on the differences between them.

> **Stop and think**
>
> It is clear that there are differences between spoken and written language.
>
> Think of as many differences as you can.

People use the language for communicating through coherent and cohesive stretches of language. In other words, they normally use more than a couple of words and sentences; they produce longer stretches of language by putting words and sentences together. These chunks of language must follow each other and be connected in a logical way in order to transmit a specific message. This process is called discourse, and its linguistic product is called text.

As people can communicate through the spoken and written means, there are spoken and written discourses and spoken and written texts. These discourses and texts develop different features due mainly to the different conditions in which they are produced, which relate to two factors: time and audience.

When speaking, time pressure does not allow much planning, while in writing there is usually plenty of time to plan. Regarding audience, when writing, the reader is not present, and this makes it almost impossible to get immediate feedback. This implies that when writing, we must compensate for this lack with clearer and explicit language, which usually makes written discourse more formal. On the other hand, when speaking, the listener is present and can give immediate feedback to what is being said. This implies that when speaking, the message can be understood with fewer words, which usually makes spoken discourse more informal.

It does not mean that speaking will always be spontaneous and informal, or that writing will be always formal and planned. Still, it is a good start to set the differences between spoken and written discourses relying on the factors of time and audience as established on the previous paragraph, as they are more evident in this way.

✎ **Activity 4. LAS 404 Spoken vs written discourse.** Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

✎ Read the directions and do **Activity 5. LAS 405 Contrasting spoken vs written discourse (PORTFOLIO)** in the corresponding section on Eminus.

As can be seen, unplanned spoken discourse and planned written discourse are very different from each other. Nevertheless, we have also mentioned that they do not always occur under these circumstances. To write this guide, I have actually used a few expressions that are more commonly found in spoken discourse, such as question tags or fillers. Why do you think I did so? Well, it is mainly because I wanted to make the guide not that formal and more interactive in order to establish a sort of more personal relationship with the readers... Hope it's kind of worked...

4.3 Meanings and functions

Both grammar and vocabulary are used to communicate the user's meanings. Although grammar's role is more important in written texts, given that contextual information in this case is very little, its importance in spoken contexts is undeniable. Grammar is necessary in both written and spoken contexts to widen the variety of meanings that people may want or need to express.

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of meanings that can be conveyed through grammar based on the two main purposes of the language. First, there is the representational role. In this case, the purpose of using the language is to represent the world as people experience it: What happens? Who is involved? What effects do events have on others? When do they happen? Where? How? And second, there is the interpersonal role. This role has to do with the different lexical and grammatical options there are to convey the same meaning.

It has been established that the same meaning can be conveyed through different grammatical options, but it is also possible that the same grammatical option expresses different meanings. This is possible due to the fact that the same grammatical option may have different functions depending on the intention of the person who is using it. For instance, the function of the form *I'm sorry* can be apologising or asking for repetition. Moreover, the same function can be expressed using different forms. For example, the function of the form *Would you like to come with us?* is inviting, but this function can also be expressed through forms such as *We have the pleasure to invite you*... or *Let's go to ...* .

Stop and think

Apologising, asking for repetition and inviting have been mentioned as functions of the language. Make a list of as many functions of this type as you can, and add an example of the forms in which they can be expressed.

Although there is not a one-to-one match between form and meaning or form and function, teaching the forms, that is the grammar, without matching those with a meaning or a function will very likely result in misuses and misunderstandings. Evidently, the context plays an essential role in identifying the people's intended meanings. This is why people must have certain knowledge about the situations in which language is being used. This kind knowledge is called pragmatics, but once again, that's another story...

Forum Language Functions

Go to the forum "**Activity 6. LAS 406 FORUM Language Functions**" when indicated and comment on different functions of the language of your choice and the possible forms in which they can be expressed.

Activity 7. LAS 407 Discourse analysis (PORTFOLIO).

Activity

- Record a conversation in English and transcribe two minutes of it. You can use a conversation from a movie. In either case, make sure there are enough instances of the spoken language features mentioned in section 4.2.
- Write the written account of the conversation as in the example of LAS 405.
- Enumerate and exemplify the differences between the two texts.
- Find examples of forms and their functions in both texts.
- Upload your file in the corresponding Activity.

Content

- First: transcription of conversation (in case it is from a film, specify it), with each line numbered.
- Second: written account of the conversation, indicating the number of lines every five lines.
- Third: list of differences with examples (using the number of lines in both transcription and written account).
- Fourth: examples of functions, indicating text (transcription or written account) and line.

Format requirements

- Name your file LAS_407_YourName (eg. LAS_407_PatriciaNúñez)
- On the header: your name (left margin) and the course (right margin), font Arial, size 10
- The rest of the paper: font Arial, size 12
- The heading Unit 4 – LAS 407 Discourse analysis, centred and in bold and in font size 16 Margins: 2.5 cm
- Block style: justified, space between lines: 1.5, double space between paragraphs

Forum Discourse

Go to the forum "**Activity 8. LAS 408 FORUM Discourse**" when indicated to share you insights on the issues of this unit. Feel free to focus on what you found the most interesting, or any aspects that caught your attention the most. This discussion will support your work on the unit essay.

Activity 9. LAS 409 Short essay 2 (Grammar and Discourse).

Activity

Write an essay about your insights on units 3 and 4 (Grammar and Discourse):

• Begin your paper with an introduction presenting what you will include in your essay in a general way.
• Summarize the topics that you found more interesting relevant succinctly, justifying your choice of these topics in terms of your English teaching (or learning) experience (e.g. How do these topics contribute to your understanding of grammar and discourse).
• Include a description of your experience as an English teacher (or student) in relation to the topics describing how you have dealt with them in the classroom (This is the most important part of your essay in terms of content).
• Finish with a restatement of your reasons for your choice of topics and how the contents of the unit have
• Finish with a contributed to your understanding of them.
• Do not use any subheadings (such as 'Introduction', 'Conclusion' or any other). Just give an appropriate title to your essay.
• Use YOUR OWN WORDS. Any sign of plagiarism will render your work invalid.

Upload your file in the corresponding Activity.

Your essay will be evaluated under the following criteria:

• Content (Summary of most relevant topics for you, justification for your choice of these topics, description of your teaching/learning experience in relation to the topics)	4
• Organization (Order of ideas – Introduction, Development, Conclusion; Paragraphing; Cohesion and Coherence; Punctuation and Mechanics)	4
• Language (Grammar, Vocabulary and Register – semi-formal)	1
• Format (Format requirements)	1
TOTAL	10

Format requirements:

- Name your file:LAS_ShortEssay2_YourName (eg. LAS_ShortEssay2_PatriciaNúñez)
- 1 page maximum
- 280 words minimum (title and header do not count)
- On the header: your name (left margin) and the course (right margin), font Arial, size 10
- The rest of the paper: font Arial, size 12
- Appropriate title (not just the names of the units), in bold and centred
- APA style referencing (if needed)
- Margins: 2.5 cm
- Block Style: Justified, space between lines: 1.5, NO indentation in the first line of each paragra- ph, double space between paragraphs (NOT TRIPLE, if you are using the Word paragraph spa- cing, then DO NOT use double space)
- Number of words at the end (right margin) in a text box

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