

Propositional and Contextual Sentences: A Methodology for Teaching Grammar

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Abstract

To teach language effectively, the appropriate content should be taught for the purpose of communication—for example, in a grammar class, not only the grammar of the sentence, but also the meaning of the sentence and its role in communication should be considered. This paper discusses two different types of sentences in relation to communication and, based on that discussion, proposes a teaching methodology for a grammar class that focuses on the content to be taught in order to fulfill the purpose of language learning.

1. Introduction

In the teaching of foreign languages, the communicative approach has been widely used over the last decade. There has, however, also been an emphasis on the practice of the four skills: hearing, speaking, reading and writing. Consequently, specific courses such as conversation, writing, composition, and so forth, are often put into a curriculum. Unfortunately, each of these courses alone cannot fulfil the purpose of language learning. As a result, various problems arise: for example, learners who take reading courses lack speaking skills, while those who take conversation cannot necessarily write.

In order to solve these problems and to provide a more effective teaching method which fulfils the purpose of language learning, each of the four skills must be considered an integral part of the language practice of each individual course. More significantly, the appropriate content should be taught for the purpose of communication.

This paper will propose and discuss a teaching methodology for a grammar class¹ focusing on the content to be taught in order to fulfil the purpose of language learning.

Before going into the discussion, it is necessary to look at the language in relation to communication. In this paper, the discussion will start at the sentence level. The problems to be discussed are:

1. What is the meaning of a sentence?
2. What is the typology of sentences?

2. The Meaning of a Sentence

The study of languages has long been conducted by logicians who explain language by focusing on the truth value of a sentence. Austin was a pioneer who emerged from the traditional forms of analysis by proposing a comprehensive theory of speech acts in which he distinguished three kinds of act: locutionary, illocutionary, perlocutionary. However, Austin was not really successful in his proposal. For example, as D. Holdcroft (1978) points out:

...But the nature of the distinction between both the first and the second kind of act, and the second and third kind, is far from clear...

Searle, who develops the notion of the speech act by relating transformational grammar to the speech act, considers the roles of sentences in communication. As H.F.R. Chau (1985) mentions, Searle² points out:

The limitations of Chomsky's assumptions become clear only when we attempt to account for the meaning of sentences within his system, because there is no way to account for the meaning of a sentence without considering its role in communication since the two are essentially connected ... semantic competence is mostly a matter of knowing how to talk, ... how to perform speech acts.

The idea of the locutionary act and the illocutionary act as proposed by Austin has been further developed by Jerrold Katz (1977), who proposes the idea of propositional structure and illocutionary force. Katz explains that a sentence has two elements:

1. Propositional content
2. Propositional type

The propositional content of a sentence is the information that determines the particular speech act (within the categories specified by its propositional type and subtype); a token performs in the null context. The propositional type of a sentence (in a sense) is the information that determines the type of speech act that a token performs in the null context.

Katz's idea can be explained by the following sentences:

1. Someone eats the cake.
2. Who eats the cake?

Sentence 1 and sentence 2 have the same content, or proposition: "A certain person eats a certain cake at a certain time." However, the two sentences are of different types: the former one is an assertive sentence while the latter is an interrogative.

The meaning of a sentence proposed by the theory of speech acts is the basis of the idea of the proposition element and the modality element of a sentence developed later on by many linguists. The proposition is the content of the sentence and the modality is the speaker's attitude or opinion at the time he or she expresses the utterance. F.R. Palmer (1988:15) points out:

The distinction between proposition and modality is very close to that of locutionary act and illocutionary act as proposed by Austin (1962:98). In the locutionary act we are "saying something", while in the illocutionary act we are "doing something" – answering a question, announcing a verdict, giving a warning or marking a promise...

Palmer gives more details about modality:

... "modality" in this sense, referring to all the non-propositional elements of a sentence, ... it would include such matters as tense and aspect, which can be regarded as distinct grammatical categories, and also, as the quotation from Lewis suggests, question and negation...

Like many scholars, Minoru Nakau (1994) claims that the elements of proposition and modality form the meaning of a sentence. Nakau explains that the modality is the mental attitude at the instant that the utterance is expressed. He proposes two hierarchical classes of modality: S modality and D modality. S modality is a proposition-oriented attitude while D modality is a context-oriented attitude. Nakau explains that S modality or the proposition-oriented attitude is the speaker's assertion about the sentence's truth value. It is the inner obligatory semantic element. D modality is the consciousness (intention, attitude) of the speaker concerning the speech act in a certain context. This is the attitude of transmission. In the theory of speech acts, it is presumably to have the hearer at the site of the utterance. The context-oriented attitude is the outer unobligatory semantic element. Nakau demonstrates the two hierarchical classes of modality schematically as follows:

$$M(S)^2 \rightarrow D\text{-MODALITY} \hat{\sim} M(S)^1$$

$$M(S)^1 \rightarrow S\text{-MODALITY} \hat{\sim} \text{PROP}^4$$

Nakau gives samples of each modality as follows:

S modality:

1. *Modality of truth judgment: may, must, can, believe, I (don't) think, it seems, I say*
2. *Modality of judgment withholding: I wonder, It is said*
3. *Modality of (dis) approval: I doubt, I disapprove*
4. *Modality of value judgment: I regret, foolishly*
5. *Modality of deontic judgment: I promise, may (I)?*

D modality:

1. *Modality of discourse (text) formation: and, but, first of all, however*
2. *Modality of speech act manner: frankly, if I may ask, Again I say*
3. *Modality of informational salience: Each part he examined carefully, Only John protested, Who protested?*
4. *Modality of interpersonal relations: (honorific) please e.g., it would help me a lot if you could please open the door*
5. *Modality of interjection/ritual convention: Ah, Hey, No, Yes, I wish you a happy New Year*

Nakau's idea concerning the two hierarchical classes of modality is outstanding. When judging the criterion of attitude, the attitude in S modality is rather objective and the attitude in D modality is rather subjective. This is different from what Palmer claims. He explains that the modality must be subjective.

In this paper, the idea of the meaning of a sentence is based on that of Nakau, especially the idea that modality is on a scale running from objectivity to subjectivity.

3. Typology of Sentences

From the point of view of functions of sentences, Chau proposes the following types of sentences:

Non-performatives

1. Descriptives
2. Assertives

Performatives

1. Expressives
2. Directives

The present paper agrees with Chau in classifying the types of sentences by their semantic and functional standpoint. However, to distinguish the objective and subjective attitudes of modality, the present paper will use a different terminology:

1. Propositional sentence
2. Contextual sentence

The propositional sentence covers the descriptive and assertive sentences when the speaker expresses an utterance focusing on the content of the sentence. This type of sentence the speaker expresses with an objective attitude, a proposition-oriented attitude. For the contextual sentence, the

speaker has a subjective attitude towards the situation of the utterance, such as answering a question, making a request, and so forth.

4. Content to Be Taught in the Grammar Class

The present paper proposes two types of sentences in language. It is suggested that in teaching a foreign language, the two types of sentences should be introduced in the following order: the propositional sentence first, followed by the contextual sentence. The reasons are:

1. An effective teaching method should begin with “simplicity” developing towards “complexity”.
2. The expressions of a propositional sentence have less variety.
3. Contextual sentences are concerned with the pragmatic domain; therefore, the selection of appropriate words causes complications in language learning.

The following are the example topics that should be taught in a sequence from propositional to contextual sentences:³

1. Propositional sentence: N1 V to be N2 (along with negation and question):
N1 pen/khumi N2.
2. Propositional sentence: N V (Past and Non - past): N (cà) V (O).
3. Propositional sentence: Past experience: N used to V: N khøey V.
4. Propositional sentence: N can V (O) (along with negation, quantity):
N V (O) dáy/pen.
5. Propositional sentence: Question words: what, who: à-ray, khray.
6. Propositional sentence: Must, should: N tóoŋ/khuaan V (O).
7. Propositional sentence: Expressions of comparison: N1 to be Adj. than N2:
N1 Adj. kwàa N2.
8. Propositional sentence: N may/might: N khooŋ/àat V.
9. Contextual sentence: Conditional expressions: thâa, hàak, mûaa, phoo
10. Contextual sentence: Prohibition, command, request: hâam, coŋ, kà-rú-naa

5. Conclusions

Language is for communication, and in order to fulfil this purpose in language learning –in a grammar class, for example– not only the grammar of the sentence, but also the meaning of the sentence and its role in communication should be considered in the learning process. From the standpoint of the theory of speech acts, a sentence consists of two semantic elements: the propositional element and modality. The modality is the attitude of the speaker at the moment of the utterance. When the speaker

expresses a sentence focusing on the truth value of the sentence, he or she expresses a propositional attitude: an objective attitude. When the speaker expresses a sentence such as making a request, he or she expresses a contextual attitude, which is subjective. With regard to the propositional element and modality, sentences are mainly divided into two types, the propositional sentence and the contextual sentence. The former type should be taught before introducing the latter in accordance with the simplicity and the complexity of the two types.

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Notes

1. This is one of the courses offered in the curriculum of the Department of Asian Studies, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Asian Studies, Nagoya University of Commerce and Business Administration.
2. Some of the discussions and quotations are based on the ideas proposed by Rebecca Fuk-Hing Chau (1985)
3. This is the content taught in the Thai language grammar class for beginners in the Department of Asian Studies, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Asian Studies, Nagoya University of Commerce and Business Administration.

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