Functional Perspectives of Grammar

Definition: a set of strategies that one employs in order to produce coherent communication.

- a human-specific device
- commonly agreed upon
- for coding and communicating information
Structure vs. Function

- Structure cannot be fully understood without looking at functions.
- 2 Analogies
  **Logical Machine**
  - Exceptionless, Law-like
  - 100% rule-governed structure regardless of the function, *e.g.* a car
  **Biological Organism**
  - Structure should be studied with the parallel study of function.
  - *e.g.* the body and an axe
Arbitrary vs. Motivated Rules

- **Motivated**: communicatively transparent
- **Arbitrary**: communicatively opaque
  - Due to historical change and functional re-assignment
  - Biological Analogy: vestigial organs

- Examples (Great Vowel Shift in Germanic):
  - Nouns with irregular plurals:
    » goose vs. geese
  - Verbs with irregular past tense:
    » leave vs. left
What is a ‘Rule’?

- What is a RULE in language?
- Is it the same as mathematic or logic rules?
  - If and only if…. 
    - If p, then q
  - Exception-less
  - Basis for formal paradigms
    - formal semantics
    - formal syntax
Functional View of a Rule

- “Every rule has exceptions!”
- Why?
- Rules in language are:
  - different from mathematic rules
  - most commonly used strategies/devices
  - typically apply to the majority of contexts
- Exceptions:
  - exceptional strategies applied to exceptional contexts or purposes
Application of rules

- Rules are flexible due to the flexible range of contexts.

- Biological analogy:
  - Lower-level perceptual processing: automated, pre-wired
    » closed behavioral program
  - Higher-order skills: Context-dependent, deliberate, attended
    » open behavioral program (e.g. playing an instrument)
The Acquisition of Language

- Depends on pre-wired neural programs (the language faculty).
- Language is acquired via repeated trial-and-error communicative interaction.
- Once acquired, it’s automated.
Cross-language
Diversity and Universality

Universality: shared strategies

- Relative pronouns “who, whom, which, where” come from interrogative pronouns
  
  \[
  \text{interrogative} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{relative pronouns}
  \]
  
  “who did you talk to?” “I met the person who you talked to yesterday.”

- Subordinator “that” comes from demonstrative pronoun
  
  \[
  \text{demonstrative} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{subordinator}
  \]
  
  “I know that.” “I know that you know it.”
Whose Grammar?
Prescriptive vs. descriptive grammars

Grammarians frown at the following sentences:
(Informal, spoken, or hypercorrection)

- “In order for your child to receive credit for this assignment, they must turn in a signed copy.”
- “Good grammar never made me no dollars.”
- “Whom beats who in the Seattle game…”
- “Twenty years of teaching taught my husband and I the value of field trips.”
- “He’s a lot older than her.”
Rules of grammar are needed:

- “Lawyer accused of **lying** to fly…”
- “He **discovered** the identity of an Evanston girl who **killed** herself **before** the newspaper regular reporter could…”
- “He is a **former** Mt. Vernon native…”
- “More attention should be paid to **hazing by university officials**.”
- “He plans to teach a **course** this fall… on the mysterious **civilization** at **Indian Community College**….”