

WHAT IS GRAMMAR?

‘What is grammar?’ is the kind of question that seems easy to answer until somebody asks it. Reference books are not very helpful – dictionaries usually say something like ‘the rules for combining words into sentences’. This is seriously incomplete: grammar does many things besides sentence-building. The definition also says nothing about the reasons why we need such rules – their functions; as if one defined a bus as a ‘large vehicle constructed on one or two levels’, without mentioning its use for public transport.

To understand what grammar is, what it does and why it is necessary, it helps to imagine language without it. Let’s suppose that we are a tribe of intelligent pre-human primates who have decided to devise a rich communication system. We start by inventing distinctive vocal signs – ‘words’ – for the various classes of things in our world (‘tree’, ‘rain’, ‘mother’, ‘axe’, ‘baby’, ‘bear’ and so on); for their shared characteristics (‘big’, ‘good to eat’, ‘red’, ‘cold’); and for processes and situations (‘eat’, ‘fall’, ‘run’, ‘die’, ‘coming’, ‘gone’). That’s all: no grammar.

What can we do with our new tool? First of all, we can indicate the existence of something, or our need for something, by using the appropriate class word (‘Bear!’, ‘Axe!’, ‘Eat!’). Secondly, we can combine words to pin down individual members of classes: to ask for a particular axe, we can produce the equivalent of, for instance, *axe big*. And thirdly, we can combine words to indicate events or states of affairs: ‘Fall baby’; ‘Rain cold’; ‘Axe big break’; ‘Eat baby acorn’.

We have invented language!

Up to a point. We soon find, however, that our communication system has three serious limitations:

1. It can’t handle complex situations. Putting together our words for ‘big’, ‘bear’ and ‘cave’, for example, will not make it clear whether there is a big bear in the cave or a bear in the big cave.
- 2 We can identify and talk about separate things in the world, but we can’t clarify their causal, spatial and other relationships. For instance, if A is doing something to B, we cannot show, just by saying the words, who or what is the doer (or ‘agent’) and who or what is the ‘doee’ (or ‘patient’). ‘Sister bear kill’ doesn’t show who killed and who got killed.
- 3 We can’t get beyond requests and affirmative statements. ‘Bear cave’ can convey the fact that there is a bear in the cave, but we have no way of asking whether there is a bear in the cave, or suggesting that there may be, or saying that there is not a bear in the cave.

We have discovered the need for grammar.

One solution is to signal the necessary extra meanings by word order. We could decide to juxtapose words for connected ideas, putting the word for a quality, for example, immediately before or immediately after the word for the thing that has the quality: 'bear big'; 'cave small'. We could also consistently put the expression for an agent earlier or later than other expressions, so that 'sister kill bear' and 'bear kill sister' would have distinct meanings. And we could use a different order for statements and questions: 'sister kill big bear' versus 'kill sister big bear?'.

Another strategy would be to alter words to signal their functions. Latin did this: *ursus* and *soror* meant 'bear' and 'sister' as agents; as patients they became *ursum* and *sororem*. This trick – inflection – could also show what goes with what: related words could all be changed or extended identically. Changes in pitch, too, too, could indicate the functions of words or utterances – as when English speakers use intonation to distinguish questions and statements.

Yet another possibility would be to invent words whose purpose is to show the function of other words. English *may* does this: it indicates that a sentence refers not to a definite fact, but to a possibility. Japanese puts small words – particles – after nouns to mean such things as 'topic', 'agent', 'patient', and 'possessor'.

These strategies are all variants on three basic options: ordering, inflection, and the use of function words. Once we have selected from these three options the devices we want to use for our language, we have devised a grammar. We now have a human language.

So, to answer the question we started with: grammar is essentially a limited set of devices for expressing a few kinds of necessary meaning that cannot be conveyed by referential vocabulary alone.

Why is it all so complicated, then? That's another story.

further reading:

Michael Swan: 'Grammar' (in *Oxford Introductions to Language Study*), OUP 2005, especially Chapter 1

Michael Swan February 2008
<swanmic@googlemail.com>