A Discussion of Grammatical Indeterminacy from a Pedagogical Perspective

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Contents

I. Introductory remarks

▶ Goals

• To share my thoughts about what to focus on in teaching grammar to EFL university learners:

  – Japan and Korea are monolingual societies and we learn English as a foreign language. Many students tend to think grammar is an annoying entity and they seem to be trapped in the framework of school grammar. Furthermore, they make it a habit to take a mechanical approach to grammar.

• To make EFL students overcome various language barriers by broadening their vision of grammar.

  – The interconnection between form, meaning and use, rather than the focus on only the area of form → an understanding of lexical idiosyncrasy of a chosen word and its combination with other words in a phrase or clause in determining concrete grammatical properties in language use → diverse senses of a lexical item and an influence of a specific meaning in a different realization of grammar → a role of position and context to understand grammatical properties in a state of   indeterminacy → to find some difference in gradience in verb complementations → Thes points need to be emphasized from a pedagogical perspective.

• To deal with the problem of indeterminacy of grammar in terms of meaning, position, and obligatoriness and optionality on the basis of fundamental data

II. The importance of lexical knowledge of basic words

• To select sample words in this research by investigating two word groups from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): one group consists of 1000   general words based on the order of frequency, and the other group 1000 academic   words.

• An interesting contrast between the bands of the first highest frequency to the 100th words in the two groups, as shown in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison between 1000 COCA general/academic word groups

	1,000 COCA general words	the band of 1st– 100th words	1,000 COCA academic words	
function words	144		64 (44%)∗	–	
content words	856	noun 446	36 (4%)∗	1,000	noun 464
		verb 191			verb 209
		adjective 137			adjective 254
		adverb 82			adverb 73

∗ 44%: 64/144, 4%: 36/856

• This means that most of our essential grammatical knowledge is formed centering around the usage of these basic words and is gradually reinforced by the expansion   of lexical knowledge. Thus, a thorough understanding of basic words needs to be emphasized in EFL instruction.

III. Indeterminacy of grammar

3.1 A thought about a negative effect of oversimplification of school grammar

• Why do the following examples show the difference in grammaticality? This question often makes EFL students embarrassed since their seemingly secure grammatical knowledge is being challenged.

(1) a. I have a car.

b. *I'm having a car.

(2) a. Should I have a baby? ['give birth']

b. I'm having a baby. ['pregnant']

(3) a. I have a headache. / I have a bad cold. [common]

b. *He is having cancer. → He has cancer. [long-term]

c. *I have an asthma attack. → I am having an asthma attack. [short term]

(4) a. They are having a good time.

b. They are having dinner.

c. My child is having a bath.

Table 2. Gradience in the use of verb 'have'

criterion / sentence		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
SVO		+	+	+	+
passivization		–	–	–	–
progressive		–	+	±	+
meaning	possession	+			
	activity		+ (2a)		+ (4b, 4c)
	experience		+ (2b)	+	+ (4a)

• Semantic similarity but different grammar → an influence of lexical idiosyncrasy

(5) a. His uncle had two cars. → *Two cars were had by his uncle.

   b. His uncle owned two cars. → Two cars were owned by his uncle.

(6) a. The president gave (big money) to the charity.

     → The president gave the charity big money.

   b. The president donated some money to the charity.

     ↛ *The president donated the charity some money.

• We need to consider lots of factors in judging grammaticality: In (1-4) the semantic and pragmatic properties of objects following the verb ′have′ lead to grammatical differences. / in (5) and (6) an influence of lexical idiosyncrasy on grammar.

• The problem is that EFL learners are immersed in oversimplification of school grammar, which often makes them confused whenever they are faced with such examples.

3.2. Grammar and meaning

 3.2.1. The relation between various complementations of a verb and meanings

• The verb 'make': one of the verbs occuring in academic prose with a frequency of more than 1,000 times per 1 million words (Biber et. al., 1999).

• Different senses relevant to its complementation, as shown in (7) → an interesting difference between grammar and meaning → a lexical factor working in grammatical difference

(7) a. Mary made her sister a doll. (S V IO DO) [′create or produce something′]

b. Diane would make a good teacher. (S V C) ['become', linking verb]

c. They have made those choices. (S V O) ['do/say something by co-occurring

with some nouns]

d. She made him a good wife. (S V O C_S) ['She was a good wife to him']

e. Police sirens made him tremble. (S V O C_O) ['cause something to happen'/

O C_O = a complement with a bare infinitive]

f. Tom made Bill revise the pamphlet. ['force someone to do something']

→ Bill was made to revise the pamphlet by Tom.

cf. Tom had the pamphlet revised by Bill.

'make': [NP_1 V_1 [NP_2 V_2 (NP_3)] → [NP_2 be made to V_2 (NP_3)]

[+ bare infinitive]

'have': [NP_1 V_1 [NP_2 V_2 (NP_3)] → [NP_1 V_1 [NP_3 V_2+en by NP_2]]

• In terms of meaning, the sharing of semantic feature of causation, but different ways of passivization

Table 3. Gradience in grammar of the verb 'make'

Sentence		(7a)	(7b)	(7c)	(7d)	(7e)	(7f)
	SVC		+				
	SVO			+			
Pattern	SVO_iO_d	+					
	$SVOC_o$					+	+
	$SVOC_S$				+		
Passivization		+	−	+	−	+	+

• The same pattern (S V O C_O) in (8) → resultative object complements in common → a common meaning of a verb but different semantic roles of a subject in each sentence →

an understanding of semantic roles of arguments in a sentence

(8) a. <u>Juliet's agent</u> made her a star. (agent)

    b. <u>The backhoe</u> made the job easier. (instrument)

    c. <u>Tracy's husband</u> makes her mad. (causer)

     [a common core meaning: to cause someone or something to be in a

     particular state or change to another state]

3.2.2. The limitation of a division between intransitive and transitive verbs

• A great deal of overlap between transitive and intransitive verb types, as shown in the

following examples with a focus on one of the academic verbs with a high frequency,

'develop'

(9) A. a. <u>All children</u> develop at different rates. ['grow/change'] (theme)

     b. There develop <u>all children</u> at different rates.

    → unaccusative verb type

   B. a. <u>She</u> is complaining about the unfairness in the office. (agent)

     b. *There is complaining she about the unfairness in the office.

    → pure intransitive/unergative verb type

(10) a. The company is developing <u>the tourist industry</u>. (theme)

    b. <u>The tourist industry</u> is being developed by the company. (theme)

    → transitive/accusative verb type

(11) a. I'd like to fully develop <u>my idea</u> before discussing it. (theme)

    b. <u>My idea</u> is fully developing. (theme) → ergative verb type

Table 4. Gradience in grammar of the verb 'develop'

Sentence	(9Aa)	(9Ba)	(10a)	(11a)	(11b)
Pattern SVO			+	+	
SV	+	+			+
There-construction	+	–	–	–	–
θ-role of subject	theme	agent	agent	experiencer	theme
verb type	unaccusa.	unerga.	accusa.	accusa.	erga.

☞ unaccusa(tive)/ unerga(tive)=pure intransitive/ accusa(tive)=transitive/

   erga(tive)

• Multiple analysis and gradience in verb complementation → limitation of a clear classification of grammar

• The problem with the traditional definition of transitivity as 'any verb that takes a DO is considered transitive.' → Transitivity is a continuum.

• Korean EFL students seem to be weak at the correct usage of ergative verb type, as shown in the following errors in (12). The errors reflect a negative transfer of L1 Korean because many Korean verbs that are commonly passivized correspond in meaning to English ergative and change-of-state verbs (Cowan, Choi, and Kim, 2003).

(12) a. *It is ridiculous that most women in developing countries *are suffered*

   from extreme poverty.

   b. *For the last decades, instructional environments *have been* enormously

   evolved with the development of various electronic communication media,

   especially in colleges, business training and continuing education institutes.

   c. *The expression on her face was suddenly changed from sadness to rage.

• The necessity of an understanding of several semantic types of verbs and their

grammatical properties by overcoming the limitation of a simple division between intransitive and transitive verbs

• An imperfect match between syntax and semantics with regard to a verb ʹprovideʹ used as a transitive verb (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, p. 255), as shown in the following examples.

(13) a. Sue Brown provides an excellent example of a woman who has achieved

outstanding success in the world of business while bringing up a large

family. [could be replaced with 'is', but grammatically its object is not treated as

a predicative because the passive is OK]

b. The government provides the necessary funds. ['to give someone something

that they want or needʹ]

3.3. Grammar and position

 3.3.1. Differences in grammar and meaning relevant to adjective positions

• To notice some difference in meaning of adjectives, depending on their positions (attributive and predicative)

• The senses of a given adjective can vary according to what kinds of nouns can be modified in NPs., as shown in the following examples.

(14) a. We climbed the hill to watch the sunset, but we are too late.

[ʹbehind scheduleʹ]   cf. a penalty for late registration

b. the late 18th century [ʹnear the end of a period of timeʹ]

c. a late news development [ʹhappening at a time just before the presentʹ]

d. my late aunt [ʹrecently deceasedʹ]

(15) a. She did not have a particular cafe in mind for their meeting.

['specific', restrictive adjective, particularising attributives]

b. Two matters need to be given particular attention.

['special', only before noun]

c. She's very particular about what she eats. ['picky', never before noun]

• Some adjectives that show such difference in meaning according to their positions or what kinds of head noun is modified: examples with regard to 'likely' as shown in (16)

(16) a. The most likely cause of the fire was a cigarette. / She is likely to pass

the test. ['probably going to happen, or probably true', both positions]

b. She's a likely candidate for the job.

['suitable, or almost certain to be successful', only attributive position,

modal attributives]

c. a likely story [(spoken) 'used for telling someone that you do not believe

what they have just said']

• A close relationship between meaning and position: The distributional properties reflect the grammar and meaning of a word.

• The problem with EFL learners: They come to know about this kind of word in the beginning with only one or two meanings and this early fixed memorization tends to disturb the expansion of further grammatical knowledge.

• To make students conscious of the relation between grammar, meaning and position.

• The concept of inherent and noninherent distinction in the use of adjectives: The distinction between inherent and noninherent senses is useful for an understanding of the restriction on attributive and predicative occurrence.

ex) *an old man* → *The man is old.* [the same meaning of age, inherent use, both

positions]

cf. *my old friend* ['the length of the friendship', noninherent use, only attributive

position with this meaning]

↝ *My friend is old*. ['age of the friend']

my old school ['former', noninherent use, only attributive position]

• Grammar is in a state of indeterminacy without considering a context and grammatical properties need to be discussed at least in terms of phrasal units.

• Adjectives with inherent senses: to characterize the referent of the head noun directly,

to occur usually in both positions

Adjectives with noninherent senses: to describe head nouns indirectly, the degree of

the property expressed by the head noun, or a head noun in terms

of some entity that is associated with it → to occur only in

attributive position, as shown in the following examples.

(17)   inherent   noninherent

   a. a firm handshake   a firm friend ↝ *The friend is firm.

                                    [the firmness of the friendship, amplifier]

   b. a complete victory   a complete fool ↝ *The fool is complete.

                                    [the completeness of the folly, amplifier]

   c. the total cost of the project   a total stranger   ['complete']

   d. urban areas   an urban planner ['relating to towns and cities']

                                    (a historical novelist,   foreign affairs)

                                    [associative attributives]

• In the case of the word 'total', its position is restricted to attributive position regardless of inherent and noninherent uses. The word 'urban' usually occurs in attributive position as well.

• EFL learners need to be exposed to these contrastive differences so that they can improve their linguistic intuition.

3.3.2. Differences in grammar and meaning relevant to adverbial positions

• A crucial influence of semantic and grammatical roles of adverbials on the position has to be noted, though this approach is not easy for nonnative speakers because the factor of lexical idiosyncrasy is so strong, as shown in the following examples.

(18) a. *Consisitently, the water kept boiling.

    b. The lawyer's objections were consistently overruled.

• Grammatical difference in (18): The subject of the sentence (18a) is nonpersonal and the adverb 'consistently' is a subject subjunct which cannot cooccur with nonpersonal subjects in an intransitive or active-voice clause.

  cf. The reason for the grammaticality in (18b): a passive sentence/   it implies that

    an invisible agent is personal (Quirk et al., 1985).

• A correlation between semantic/grammatical types and positions, as shown in (19).

(19) a. I am frankly surprised at your behavior.   [emphasizer, central]

    b. Frankly, I am surprised at your behavior. [disjunct, front]

(20) a. Happily, they watched TV until dinner. [evaluation, front]

    b. They happily watched TV until dinner. [manner, central or end]

  cf. c. Probably they would watch TV for hours.   [front]

d. They probably would watch TV for hours.   [pre-auxiliary]

e. They would probably watch TV for hours.   [post-auxiliary]

(21) a. The child can walk naturally. [manner adjunct]

b. Naturally, he passed the examination. [disjunct]

• In the case of 'indeed', this correlation becomes more complicated, as shown in (22).

(22) a. The play was indeed excellent/ excellent indeed.   [emphasizer, right before or

after its modified head word]

b. Indeed, the play was excellent. [disjuncts, initial]

c. I indeed appreciate your help. [emphasizer used with gradable verbs, 'I greatly

appreciate your help.']

d. She indeed sat next to them. [subjunct used with a nongradable verb, a

reinforcing and emphatic effect]

• According to Quirk et al. (1985), the function of many emphasizers is similar to that of disjuncts. There is a difference between clause-oriented disjuncts and VP-oriented adjuncts regarding prosodic detachment.

• In this way, adverbials can be put in different positions in general and the selection of one position rather than another is influenced by several factors. Thus, it is very difficult to explain this phenomenon in a systematic and general way.

• In some cases, for EFL learners, it would be more convenient if we accept the combination as a chunk/lexical bundles because certain amplifier adverbs such as *greatly, badly, entirely, completely,* etc. tend to co-occur predominantly with certain semantic classes of verbs, as shown in the following examples.

(23) a. They greatly admire his music.

    b. I need a drink badly.

    c. I entirely + agree / We badly + need, want / I completely + forget/

    They greatly + admire, enjoy

• Adverbs which are used with high frequency in academic prose:

  (i) focusing subjunct adverbs with restrictive sense (e.g. *exclusively, solely, mainly,*

    notably, particularly) and additive sense (e.g. *likewise*)

    – Most restrictive subjuncts can either precede or follow the item on which they

      are focused, though it is more usual for them to precede.

  (ii) style disjuncts which often make an implicit comment on language itself (e.g.

    approximately, generally, or *in short*).

  (iii) content disjuncts which make the speaker's comment on the content of what he is

    saying (e.g. *inevitably, naturally, significantly*)

• However, we need to remember the point that the same word can occur in different

positions depending on different functions.

3.4. Obligotoriness and optionality

 3.4.1. The roles of adverbials relevant to the limitation of five clause patterns

• EFL learners seem to be dominated by the five clause patterns. This limited

framework makes it hard for them to discern between obligatory and optional elements

when sentence structures look superficially similar to each other.

• Learners tend to think that subcategorial information of a given verb is fixed.

However, one verb can take several complementations, as shown in the following

examples. The verb 'keep' can occur with a considerable difference in meaning

depending on whether it requires or does not require an obligatory adverbial.

(24) a. His brother kept him. [SVO, 'supported him financially']

b. I have been keeping tropical fish for five years. [SVO, 'to own animals

and take care of them']

c. She keeps her car clean. [SVOC$_o$, 'make something/someone stay in state']

d. She keeps her car in the street. [SVOA , 'store something in a particular place',

obligatory adverbial]

e. His mother kept him in bed. [SVOA, 'make him stay']

• In (24d) and (24e), the same clause pattern, but different senses of the same verb

In (24c) and (24e), a common ground of meanings in differnent clause patterns

• EFL students should broaden knowledge of clause patterns by understanding the role

of adverbials in relation to a verb.

• A discussion of the problem of obligatoriness of adverbials with regard to the verb

'find', as shown in the following examples.

(25) a. I found my unfinished article in the kitchen. [ambiguous]

b. She found him in the library. [usually optional]

c. She found him of little help. [obligatory]

(26) I typed my article in the kitchen. [optional]

• In (25) superficial similarity, but different structures:

The sentence (25a) is ambiguous:

when used as an obligatory element → an object-related adverbial ['I discovered

that my unfinished article was in the kitchen.']

when used as an optional element → a subject-related adverbial ['I was in the

kitchen when I found it."] → preposing of PP possible ['In the kitchen

I found my unfinished article.']

• Formal similarity in (25a) and (26), but different interpretation: The sentence (26) has

only one interpretation, so this cannot be paraphrased as 'My article was in the kitchen

when I typed it.' → preposing of PP possible ['In the kitchen I typed it.']

• In (25b), PP is usually treated as an optional element. → ['He was in the library when

she found him.'] rather than 'She found that he was in the library.'

• The verb type and meaning play an important role in determining adverbials as an

obligatory or optional element.

• In (25c), the PP 'of little help' is an obligatory element. → ['She found that he was of

little help.'], not 'He was of little help when she found him.'

3.4.2. Obligatory and optional predicatives

• In English, there are many sentences with the apparently same pattern but different

structures. In order to distinguish between these examples, we need to understand

obligatory and optional predicatives in terms of structure and meaning.

(27) a. He looked young. [obligatory]

    b. He died young. [optional, depictive] → 'When he died, he was young.'

         e.g. He returned broke./ She married young.

(28) a. He made her angry. [obligatory]

    b. He washed the bathroom clean. [optional, resultative (as a reult of the action of

         'washing the bathroom'] e.g. He painted the barn blue.

(29) a. He kept Kim warm. [obligatory]

    b. He ate the steak almost raw. [optional, depictive]

(30) a. He made himself unpopular. [internal complementation obligatory]

    b. He talked himself hoarse.　[internal complementation optional] → ʻHe became

        hoarse as a result of talking.ʼ

(31) a. They served the coffee black. [optional, Object as predicand]

    b. They served the coffee blindfolded [optional, Subject as predicand]

Table 5. Gradience in verb types

Sentence		(27a)	(27b)	(28a)	(28b)	(29a)	(29b)	(30a)	(30b)	(31a)	(31b)
Pattern	SVC	+									
	SV(C)		+								
	SVOC			+		+		+			
	SVO(C)				+		+			+	+
	Subject-related										+
	Object-related									+	
	VP-related				+						
	SV(OC)								+		
Meaning type of C											
	Depictive	+	+			+	+			+	+
	Resultative			+	+			+	+		

• What do these pairs of sentences suggest to EFL learning? Not only major patterns but also minor patterns should be noted in pedagogical grammar.

• The necessity of conscious awareness of the structural differences in spite of superficial similarities

• The ability to distinguish between obligatory and optional elements in sentences would help understand meaning properly.

IV. Concluding remarks

▶ The results of an investigation into the problem of indeterminacy of grammar in terms of meaning, position, and obligatoriness

• The grammar of basic verbs is very complicated and lots of factors are to be considered in explaining different grammatical properties of the same verb.

• The influence of the polysemy of a verb has been ascertained in different grammatical realizations. In some cases, an imperfect match between grammar and meaning has been found despite meaning similarity between two words.

• The importance of understanding grammatical and semantic properties which are determined by the combination of a given word and the other words in a phrasal or clausal unit

• The problem of oversimplification of grammar: a great deal of overlap between transitive and intransitive verb types → the subdivision of verb types to clarify different grammatical realizations by considering semantic roles of arguments, an imperfect match between grammar and meaning, and the degree of transitivity → the necessity of the concept of gradience in verb types

• The importance of understanding the relation between different senses of an adjective and position restrictions (attributive and predicative) → the relation of the distinction between inherent and noninherent senses to the restriction on attributive and predicative occurrence

• A crucial influence of semantic and grammatical roles of adverbs on the position → a challenge to EFL learners caused by the flexibility of adverbial position and lexical

idiosyncrasy → an overlap between some kinds of adjunct, subjunct and disjunct → the necessity of a chunk approach for EFL learners caused by a strong relation between a verb meaning type and adverbs

• The limitation of five clause patterns → an important role of the verb type and meaning in determining adverbials/predicatives as an obligatory or optional element → an importance of an understanding of a structural difference in superficially similar sentences → Not only major patterns but also minor patterns should be noted in pedagogical grammar to understand sentence meaning properly.

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