

Linguistics:

Can't Live With It, Can't Live Without It

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The knowledge and understanding of linguistics is essential for all teachers so that they can learn, first, to identify and to objectify their own knowledge of English, and subsequently, to impart that knowledge effectively to their students. It is as crucial for teachers of native speakers as it is for teachers of non-native learners of English.

Linguistics helps us to acquire “X-ray” vision of our mother tongue by showing us the skeletal framework of language. Just as humans are supported by their rigid skeletons, so too, our language operates by means of skeletal principles without which our sentences would not hold together.

We have seen the unfortunate outcome produced by the failure to teach the nuts and bolts of our complex language. By neglecting grammatical structure in favor of the “Whole Language” approach, we have inadvertently led many students into functional illiteracy. As a result, many of our high school graduates are not even able to read their own diplomas.¹

“The Wozy Briggles”

In order to illustrate the power of grammatical structure within a sentence, I have developed a light-hearted exercise for teachers which I call “The Wozy Briggles.” It can, in turn, be easily adapted by teachers for use with their students.

This exercise utilizes principles from all four of the main fields of linguistics: phonology, morphology, semantics and syntax. In one easy exercise students can learn about the:

- ◆ interaction between the constituents of a sentence
- ◆ vast difference between content and function words
- ◆ “royal centrality” of verbs

¹ Out of an approximate total of 2,800,000 annual high school graduates for the early 1990s, 25% (700,000) were unable to read their own diplomas (*Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1990 & 2002, tables 251 & 200 respectively) and (Kaplan, 1995).

- ◆ “refugee status” of prepositional phrases
- ◆ immense power of inflectional morphemes
- ◆ and the combination of flexibility and rigidity in English word order.

“The Wozy Briggles” exercise is effective, in part, because it makes use of nonsense words or lexical gaps to emphasize the powerful grammatical forces that comprise an English sentence.²

The use of lexical gaps stimulates the learner’s sense of grammar. The learner hears the word for the first time and cannot help trying to attach meaning to it, just as we do when we read the works of Lewis Carroll and Dr. Seuss. If it sounds like it could be an English word, then our semantic engines start to work to create meaning.

To begin the exercise, I ask for 12 volunteers to come to the front of the class. I hand them each a card with either a word or a punctuation mark written on it (See the detailed description attached). I then tell them to simply hold the cards up and begin to arrange themselves in any way they choose. Without any prompting from me, participants immediately set about discussing the proper way to form a sentence, wasting no time in putting the sentence together into proper grammatical order.

How can they do this when they have never seen these words before and have no idea of their meanings? In performing this exercise, the participants demonstrate that the instinct for grammar is powerful and is within the grasp of all learners. Though it may be hard for us to believe, all of us, especially children, love grammar. We crave the communication power it gives to our speech. This exercise is powerful precisely because it taps into the very core of our existence, our desire to communicate effectively.

² Lexical gaps can appear among *content words* (nouns, main verbs, adjectives and adverbs, which are filled with meaning and a minimum of grammar) but not among *function words* (pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, determiners and auxiliary verbs; these words are rigid and have no such sense of humor). English lexical gaps must meet two criteria: 1. they must fit the phonological expectations of English, and 2. they must be available; that is still unused in the language.

Among the words in the exercise, the bound morphemes go to work to prepare individual words to enter major grammatical relationships within the sentence: the two inflectional morphemes (-s at the end of *briggles* and -ing at the end of *blimming*) and the derivational morpheme (-ly at the end of *vorefully*). In addition, the unchanging function words, *The, have, been, in* and *the*, do what they are supposed to do; they provide the syntactic glue to corral the unruly lexical gaps.

This exercise produces a linear manifestation of all the possible word order patterns for such a sentence. Once participants have successfully produced the surface manifestation of the deep structure sentence (*The wozy briggles have been blimming vorefully in the biddybam*), they can then begin to “transform” this sentence by moving individual words and phrases around in order to emphasize certain aspects or to produce a question. Some new linear patterns will be acceptable and some will not, as English reveals the extent to which it will tolerate flexibility in word order.

For most transformations participants will know immediately whether the new sentence is acceptable or not. Some will be rejected outright. Still others will show marginal acceptability; some participants will vote to accept the new sentence, and others will reject it. Such is the reality of English grammar. It is useful and instructive for students to explore the edges of acceptability with such sentences. This process enhances their awareness of the underlying skeletal structure of English syntax.

“The Wozy Briggles”

The	wozy	briggles	have	been	blimming	vorefully	in	the	biddybam
(white)	(green)	(blue)	(white)	(white)	(red)	(yellow)	(white)	(white)	(blue)
				.		?			
				(white)		(white)			

[Cut up cards from white, green, blue, red and yellow cardboard as shown above. The card with “blimming” written on it should measure about 14 in. by 4 in. Make the others in proportion to this. Print the words with large black markers so that they can be easily read by students at the back of the room. Write four of the cards in both lower and upper case on each side: *The/the*, *The/the*, *In/in*, and *Have/have*. The white cards are for function words; the colored ones are for content words. Notice that only the content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) have the flexibility to become “lexical gaps.” The function words have no equivalent sense of humor.

The four colors, other than white, are often sold together in large cardboard sheets.]

1. Ask for 12 volunteers from your class.
2. Bring them to the front of the class, giving each one a card.
3. Tell them to do whatever comes to their minds about them.

4. As the 10 volunteers with the words are negotiating about what to do, take the two with the period and the question mark aside. Tell the person with the period to observe the sentence in formation and to show up at the end of the sentence only when the sentence is grammatically acceptable. Tell the person with the question mark to wait until we transform the sentence into a question.
5. If the sentence is acceptable but in an order other than seen above, have the person with the main verb (“blimming”) command the relevant cards to go to the positions shown above. The main verb is the “Queen” or “King” of the sentence and has the power to order the members of his/her “court” around. This is an example of Chomsky’s theory of “Government and Binding” at work; the verb “governs” the other constituents and they become “bound” to perform in “cases” that the verb determines for them. The order shown above is a surface manifestation of this sentence in its “deep structure.”
6. Transform this declarative sentence:
 - a. Have “vorefully” move into as many positions as would be grammatically acceptable and discuss the ways this movement alters the meaning of the sentence.
 - b. Ask the rest of the students in the class whether the prepositional phrase (“in the biddybam”) is functioning as an adjective or an adverb in the sentence.
 - c. Tell the three people holding this prepositional phrase to leave their positions and to move as a group along the sentence to see if anyone will let them into a new position.
 - d. With the PP in the front of the sentence, ask the class whether it is functioning as an adverb or an adjective.

- e. With the PP just after “briggles” (now reading “The wozy briggles in the biddybam”), ask the class the same question. All of these changes are transformations.
 - f. Rearrange (“transform”) the word order to make this sentence a question.
 - g. Now the period moves away and the person with the question mark appears at the end of the sentence.
 - h. With each transformation, make sure that the first word of the sentence is in upper case.
7. With each transformation have students discuss the syntactic roles of each of the constituents that have been moved. Especially have students think about the “middle managers” of the sentence and the ways they influence each other.
 8. Explore any other transformational possibilities. The students will enjoy moving around to see just how far they can take this rearranging of English word order.
 9. Ask the students what the sentence means. The lexical gaps are “asking for meaning to be assigned them.” You will find that some will become attached to meanings they have assigned to some of the words. This process will reinforce students’ realization of the power of linguistic fusion between sound and meaning.
 10. This exercise will also reinforce students’ awareness of the sentence order patterns (the “tree structures”) they already have in their minds.
 11. We have found that students from 3rd grade onward will thrive with sentences such as this. If the lexical gaps are too much for your younger students, write real English words on the backs of the cards.
 12. Or, have students come up with their own lexical gaps to replace these.

Syntactic Tree Diagrams

Another way of reinforcing the understanding of the grammatical structure of the sentence used in “The Wozy Briggles” exercise is by the use of a syntactic tree diagram (see illustration below). Syntactic tree diagrams have supplanted the older Reed-Kellogg sentence diagrams which were introduced in the late 19th century. Both systems were designed to produce graphic illustrations of the syntactic relationships within an English sentence. However, the old system was incapable of consistently showing the all-important hierarchy of grammatical control which takes place in any given sentence.

The following tree diagram depicts the grammatical hierarchy for “The Wozy Briggles” sentence. It demonstrates the fact that, at its core, a proper English sentence arranges the relationships between constituents in a hierarchical pattern of dominance whereby higher, more generalized constituents dominate and control smaller, more specialized constituents lower in the structure.

These trees are already deeply embedded in our minds. We don’t always know that they are there. The more we can objectify our intuitive knowledge, bring it to the surface and portray that knowledge concretely to our students, the more they will be able to gain control of English.

All students will profit from learning the constituents depicted in the tree diagram below. Every category, from the top, *Sentence*, on down to the individual words is a constituent. They comprise all of the levels of grammatical control:

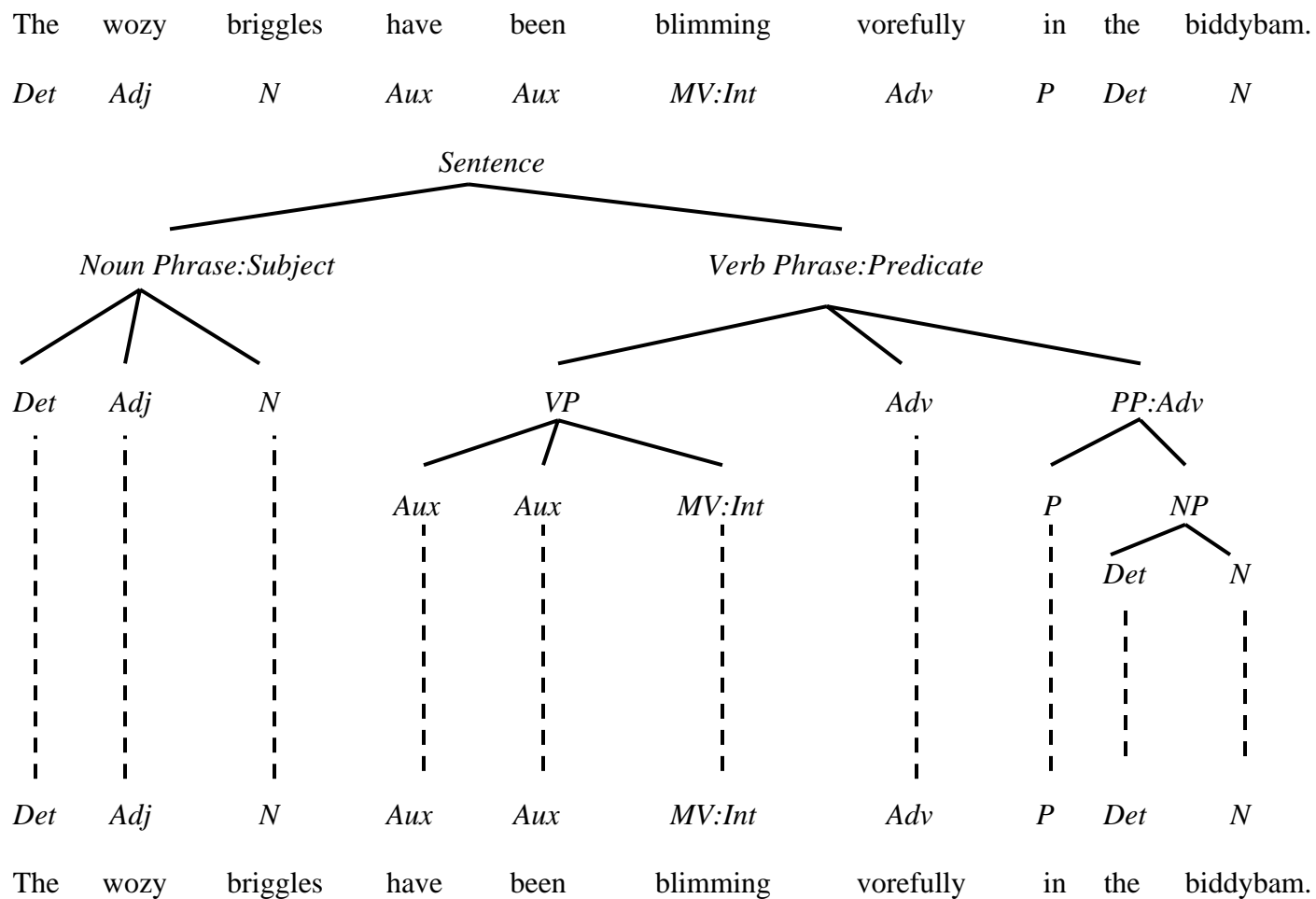
- ◆ Sentence (S)
- ◆ Noun Phrase:Subject (NP)
- ◆ Verb Phrase:Predicate (VP)
- ◆ Determiner (Det)

- ◆ Adjective (Adj)
- ◆ Noun (N)
- ◆ Auxiliary verb (Aux)
- ◆ Main intransitive verb (MV:Int)
- ◆ Adverb (Adv)
- ◆ Prepositional phrase being used as an adverb (PP:Adv)
- ◆ Preposition (P).

Conclusion

This paper presents one example of how teachers can take a few of the most powerful concepts and skills from linguistics to help our students “leapfrog” into mastery of English. A relatively small number of carefully chosen linguistic concepts can be employed in every classroom from 2nd grade throughout adult learning to provide understanding, clarity and control of this amazing language. It is no longer acceptable for us to continue to fly “with clipped wings.”

Syntactic Tree Diagram



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