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Grammaticality, Meaningfulness, and Acceptability: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract: The history of modern linguistics has witnessed ongoing row over the relationship between grammaticality meaning, and acceptability. The meaning of an expression remained controversial over the years. It varied from being a function of usage, to a matter of reference. Whereas meaning is the focal point of grammar for some theorists, others are still investigating how sentences are linked together to form meaningful and acceptable discourse.

With this uncertainty about how meaningful discourse may be interpreted, this paper aims to identify the most plausible linguistic paradigm on which the interpretation of meaning and the acceptability of a piece of discourse may be established. And while the paper recognizes the role each level of linguistic analysis plays in determining acceptability, it argues for the interdependence of all levels: grammatical, lexical, and semantic. However, while the findings of the present study acknowledge the key role of structure --based on understanding the interrelationship between sentential elements-- and semantics as a key element in determining discourse meaning, other equally important factors need to be explored. The findings lead to the conclusion that acceptability is not the product of purely linguistic factors, but exceeds it to entail key variables of context, situation, purpose, and audience, together with the pragmatics of discourse as to how the speech act relates to the real world.

Keywords: grammaticality, discourse meaning, acceptability, speech act, Structuralism, transformationalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The roots of the Speech Act Theory derive primarily from Structuralism. The theory is based on the context of situation developed by John Austin in 1962. Searle's (1969) indirect speech act was based on Austin's speech acts. For Searle, a speech act has a specific performative function in communication (cf. Searle 1969, 1979, 2001). As an important branch of the theory of language, the speech act theory, advocated by Austin 1962 --with its locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts-- was emphasized by Grice's interest in meaning and communication. An act of communication between interlocutors is considered successful if it carries a meaningful message which has been well received by the addressee. For Austin (1975), communication consists of a three-way process of: what we say, what we mean, and eventually what we accomplish. According to Oishi (2006:1) "The idea that meaning exists among these relations is depicted successfully by the concept of acts: in uttering a sentence, that is, in utilizing linguistic conventions, the speaker with an associated intention performs a linguistic act to the hearer." Therefore, it is meaning before anything else that qualifies a performative utterance or a speech situation to be acceptable by the recipient. More importantly, then, is to probe into those elements which make a speech act meaningful.

If language is a string of signs, then those signals should be subject to a system which will organize the process of sending and receiving messages. A message can only be well received if it has a purpose and a performative function which leads to a meaningful exchange between interlocutors.

The history of modern linguistics recognized the need to figure out the intricate relationship between discourse and meaning. Schools of linguistics strived to uncover the nature of this relationship. In her work The Four Main Linguistic Schools of Thought, Sarah-Claire Jordan (2015) identifies the most prominent schools of linguistic thought, namely 1) Functionalism, 2) Structuralism, 3) Generativism, and 4) Cognitivism, which were keen to explore how language structure interacts with meaning. For Functionalism, the phonology, syntax and semantics should be utilized for the use of language in its social context and for communicative and pragmatic purposes. de Saussure's and Bloomfield's Structuralism took a non-historical analysis approach where phonology and morphology were emphasized for their own sake, and with the work of the human brain being dismissed. For Generativism, language was viewed as a rule-governed behavior which applies to all humans and all language, leading to a theory of "Universal Grammar". Cognitivism, which came as a challenge to universal grammar, argues that grammar is not an inherent capacity which all humans can understand, but is rather learned through language use. Cognitivism focuses on the relationship between language and meaning, which is a work of the mind (cf. http://alphaomegatranslations.com/translation-tools/the-four-main-linguistic-schools-of-thought/).

The link between grammar and meaning is essentially historically rooted. In addition to the above-mentioned major schools of linguistic thought, other founding schools of linguistics have been consulted on the question of grammaticality and meaning. The Prague school, for example, stressed the function of elements within language, and thus laying down the roots of functionalism and cognition (cf. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Prague-school).

The present study adopts the historical approach to arrive to conclusions with regards to this special relationship between discourse, meaning, and acceptability. It traces the development of this paradigm by invoking theoretical and pragmatic justifications put forward to unravel this intricate relationship.

2. Historical Overview

The history of modern linguistics dates back to the beginnings of the 19the century. The thrust and the grinding stones for modern linguistic theory lie in the works contributed by the founders of this theory such as Wilhelm Humboldt, the first European linguist to consider language a rule-governed behavior; Edward Sapir who worked on theoretical linguistics, anthropology, and psychology; Ferdinand de Saussure, the first linguist to distinguish between the synchronic and diachronic analysis of language; Roman Jakobson, who developed many of de Saussure's ideas about synchronic linguistics; Leonard Bloomfield, who adopted the scientific approach to the study of language through structural linguistics and behaviorism; and finally Noam Chomsky, who formalized the methods of describing linguistic structures, with most schools of linguistic thought incorporating his views on the generative nature of syntactic structures (cf. http://www.listenandlearn.org/blog/7-linguists-who-changed-the-game/).

The above-mentioned group of pioneering linguists was behind the innovations which gave birth to two major schools of linguistic thought, namely Structuralism and transformationalism, which set the pace for later developments in the history of modern linguistics. The diligence and ingenuity of those distinguished scholars generated interest in studying different aspects of linguistic theory, including the social and psychological aspects which led to the rise of sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, etc. Special emphasis was placed on studying the language situation in different parts of the world in relation to geography, ethnicity, immigration, minority groups, social class, gender, etc., to focus on aspects of language acquisition, bilingualism, multilingualism, language maintenance and language shift, interference,code switching, pidginization and creolization, etc. (cf. http://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/history-modern-linguistics).

The present study sets out to examine how the two major schools of linguistics, namely Structuralism and transformationalism have approached the question of grammaticality, meaningfulness, and acceptability. It sheds light on the nature of meaning and how it can be realized in an act of written or spoken communication.

Grammaticality, Meaningfulness, and Acceptability: A Historical Perspective

For the founders of Structuralism, de Saussure and Bloomfield, language is a visible human behavior which concerns itself with the formal aspect of linguistics. According to Bloomfield (1933), linguistics is, strictly speaking, concerned with analyzing the formal aspects of language, and meaning was marginalized since it was not 'directly observable' (http://aboutlinguistictheory.blogspot.com/2012/05/leonard-bloomfield-main-contributions.html). Bloomfield's concern with the formal aspects of language, e.g., phonology, morphology and lexicon, rejects semantics as an essential component of the study of language. For him, meaning is a cognitive mental process which is beyond the observable descriptive features of language. This purely behaviorist view of Bloomfield's Structuralism rejects Sapir's mentalist approach to interpreting language. For Bloomfield, meaning is a cognitive and conceptual feature which is too abstract to be observed. And while Bloomfield argues that language is only a system of signifiers, "he accepts the Saussure premise that language study involves studying the correlation between sound and meaning, but technically, the meaning is too difficult to 'see', so it should be outside the scope of linguistics" (http://aboutlinguistictheory.blogspot.com/2012/05/leonard-bloomfield-main-contributions.html). Nevertheless, Bloomfield still argues that, for studying any correlation between sound and meaning, the two components of grammar and lexicon should be consulted. In other words, syntax and morphology combined can only interpret the meaning of a statement.

In the late 1950s, a shift from Structuralism was led by the American linguist Noam Chomsky who "treated language as a uniquely human, biologically based cognitive capacity" (McGilvray 2009:1) (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Noam-Chomsky#ref1049048. Chomsky's revolutionary move focused on linking language to cognitive psychology, and thus advocating that the study of language is not based on the behavioristic model of Structuralism but on a cognitive one.

The introduction of Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (1965) brought to light the question of meaning, where language is treated as a cognitive capacity. For Chomsky, language is an innate and inherent system of combinations which enables children to construct their own grammar. Chomsky's work on developing linguistic theory marked the introduction of transformational generative grammar. Transformational-generative grammarians realized that, together with conformity to the rules of grammar, meaning plays a key role in determining acceptability. For Chomsky, the transformational rules of grammar take into account the syntactic and semantic properties of the sentence structures. Nevertheless, at a later stage Chomsky came to abandon the phrase-structure rules, and the relationship between deep structure and the semantic interpretation, to opt for the "X-bar theory", and subsequently the reduction of operations to one operation of "Move alpha".

At this junction, Chomsky switched to the principles and parameters approach introduced in his Lectures on Government and Binding (1981), and further developed in Knowledge of Language (1986). Chomsky's main line of argument was based on the premise that we have a body of knowledge which enables us to construct phrases and sentences and the ability to understand them. His main focus was on syntax where, by applying transformational rules, different types of sentences may be generated, e.g., passive, interrogative, imperative, etc. He argues that a person's knowledge of the language, i.e., linguistic competence, is an innate capacity controlled by the brain where the rules are applied through a purely mental process which governs the stringing together of sentential elements. This set of innate rules, the work of the human mind, which enable all individuals to generate sentences was the driving force behind Chomsky's Universal Grammar. (cf. Cain 2003).

In the 1990s, Chomsky developed his "minimalist program" to end up with the "internal and external Merge" to form word sets (cf. McGilvray 2009) (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Noam-Chomsky#ref1049048. These successive changes influencing the structural, lexical and semantic relationships lend support to the thesis that, like grammaticality, meaning renders itself as inapt and not stable or reliable enough to function as an independent criterion for judging acceptability.

More recent works on grammaticality judgements have been based on the classical ones such as Chomsky (1957) and other works it predates such as Fromkin and Rodman (1998) and Newmeyer (1983). For example, Marshall et al's (2006) work "A Challenge to Current Models of Past Tense Inflection: The Impact of Phonotactics", draws on the principles of generativism, according to which a grammaticality judgment test shows that a past tense production is better modelled by Words and Rules model (cf. https://www.journals.elsevier.com/cognition).

Recent studies on grammaticality judgment tests are essentially historical in nature; they are mainly based on the stipulations of one or the other of the four major schools of linguistics: 1) Functionalism, 2) Structuralism, 3) Generativism, and 4) Cognitivism (see section 1 above). In this case, a grammaticality judgment is viewed as either a matter of well-formedness, based on the conformity of a linguistic utterance to the rules of grammar, or a matter of linguistic intuition, which has to do with the innate linguistic competence of speakers (cf. Rimmer 2006, Schütze 2011). It could also be interpreted as a function of language use for communicative and pragmatic purposes (i.e., Functionalism), or else as a grammar-meaning based relationship which is a work of the mind (i.e., Cognitivism).

More recent studies have investigated the effect of morphological complexity and grammaticality on P600, an event-related potential or peak in electrical brain activity, a neuro-linguistic approach. The results showed that well-formed sentences did not reflect any complexity. However, morphologically complex ungrammatical stimuli reflected a much larger P600 amplitude compared to the morphologically simple ungrammatical stimuli. Here again, the judgment is based on the degree of grammaticality or well-formedness of the stimuli, which is rooted in the stipulations of Structuralism, Generativism, and Cognitivism (cf. Mehravari et al. 2015).

Furthermore, the most recent works on the effects of social media on language have invoked the prescriptive vs. descriptive approach of judging language accuracy. Again, acceptability judgment in the two approaches was based on historical grounds which either opted for strict adherence to the rules of grammatical usage (i.e., prescriptive grammar), or for descriptive grammar, which describes language as it is used and not according to the standard rules of grammatical usage. In this vein, Gruber and Redeker (2014: 1) argue that "over the past four decades, discourse coherence has been studied from linguistic, psycholinguistic, computational, and applied perspectives". Traditionally then, the power of discourse had been judged on purely linguistic criteria of structural adequacy, semantic relevance, and mechanics of writing. According to Al-Salman (2017), social media features are largely inconsistent with the standards of formal discourse, which is marked with elaborate and elevated style and usage. This indicates that even the most recent works on grammaticality and meaningfulness are still judged on purely linguistic or pragmatic considerations which are deeply rooted in the works of the pioneers of general linguistic theory.

3. DISCUSSION

The historical background laid out in section 2 above supports the thesis that the ideas about the relationship between grammaticality, meaning, and acceptability are neither uniform nor well-defined. A dichotomy existed between the position of each of the two major schools of linguistic analysis: Structuralism and transformationalism against this issue. In this section of the paper, the discussion will focus on the role of each of the two aspects: (1) grammaticality, and (2) meaning, in determining acceptability.

3.1 Grammaticality

Fromkin and Rodman (1998:107) describe grammaticality in sentences and phrases as "the conformity to the syntactic rules." But according to Skadhauge (2003), a sentence which is not grammatically correct is deemed unacceptable. For him, therefore, grammaticality is acceptability (http://www.id.cbs.dk/~prs/research/probfeat.html).

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In linguistics, the term "grammaticality" does not necessarily mean correctness, but it refers to a sentence which conforms to the rules of grammar and that the grammar of that language sanctions it. In other words, grammaticality is not necessarily associated with semantic correctness or acceptability but with well-formedness (cf. Newmeyer 1983). For example, Chomsky's classic sentence:

1) "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously"

 is syntactically correct and is grammatically well formed. However, the sentence has no meaning for obvious reasons. Obviously, the combinations "colorless green" and "sleep furiously" bring together lexical opposites which are semantically incongruent or nonsensical.

Another grammatical but semantically ambiguous sentence is given in (2) below:

2) The horse raced past the barn fell.

Whereas sentence 2 fulfills the criterion of grammaticality, it falls short of directly expressing the intended meaning. In fact, this is not a simple sentence, but a complex one with a reduced relative clause: "The horse which raced ...", which renders the sentence as semantically ambiguous.

A third example of a grammatical sentence but with dubious meaning is shown in sentence (3) below:

3) The complex houses married and single soldiers and their families.

Although grammatically correct, sentence 3 is semantically deviant due to the fact that the words "complex; houses; and married" carry different parts of speech from what may have been expected. For example the word "complex" is here used as a noun and not as an adjective; the word "houses" is used as a verb instead of a noun; and the word "married" is used as an adjective and not as a past tense of the verb 'marry'.

In sum, the above examples show that although grammatically is a true measure of structural adequacy, meaning may not be realized, and the sentence may be rendered as unacceptable, as in sentence 1, or ambiguous, as in sentences 2 & 3. (cf. http://theweek.com/articles/467050/7-sentences-that-sound-crazy-but-are-still-grammatical

The previous argument brings to light how the two major schools of linguistic thought, namely Structuralism and transformationalism focused only on grammaticality and well-formedness. This trend continued up to Chomsky's Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (1965). Until then, and after Chomsky's Syntactic Structures (1957), form (i.e., phonology, morphology, and syntax), together with lexicon were the core components of linguistic analysis. That is, acceptability is judged only on the basis of grammatical correctness, while meaning has been ignored. One possible interpretation of this principle denotes that acceptability is not structure oriented but speaker oriented and it depends on what the speaker will consider as appropriate. Another possible interpretation is linked to how the ancient Greeks considered meaning. In one sense, meaning was considered a mental representation of some sort, or that the meaning of an expression depends on how it is used (cf. Robins 1979) (http://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/history-modern-linguistics). But from a structuralist point of view, grammaticality is sometimes viewed as an independent feature which is judged on its own merits, and its acceptability should not be associated with its meaningfulness.

Based on the previous arguments, purely formal grammar advocated by proponents of Structuralism falls short of providing conclusive evidence to support the existence of an inherent relationship between grammaticality and meaningfulness. It is noteworthy however that, while acknowledging the fundamental role of grammaticality, total reliance on structural well-formedness away from meaning and socio-cultural implications will render an utterance unacceptable. In other words, in a speech act proper --with its locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary elements-- the grammaticality of an utterance should not be viewed as a feature of its own to determine meaningfulness and acceptability. Unless grammaticality leads to a meaningful linguistic interaction,

the sentences will be judged unacceptable. Grammaticality is only one component of successful discourse; it only describes the theoretical aspect of language but not the observable and pragmatic ones. (http://facultyoflanguage.blogspot.com/2013/02/acceptability-and-grammaticality.html).

3.2 Meaning

Traditionally, approaches to formal semantics have focused on studying the relationship between linguistic forms and what they refer to in the real world. In recent years, especially towards the turn of the century, the exploration of meaning in human languages has shifted to that aspect of meaning which links itself with the grammatical system of human languages, thus leading to a research programme of "grammatical semantics" (cf. Mohanan and Wee 1999).

Historically, only after Chomsky's (1965) Aspects of The Theory of Syntax was grammaticality considered an insufficient criterion to determine sentential acceptability, and the role of semantics as a determinant of meaning was recognized. This is consistent with Austin's (1975) argument that the basic unit of communication is the speech act, with meaning as the building block of mutual understanding between people intending to communicate (http://communicationtheory.org/speech-act-theory/).

As shown in section 3.1 above, sentences 1, 2, and 3 have fulfilled the condition of grammaticality, but they are categorized as either meaningless or ambiguous. The question is, if meaning is an essential element in successful communication, how will it affect acceptability in discourse?

 It is often the case that some sentences are grammatical and meaningful, others are ungrammatical and meaningless, while some others are both grammatical and meaningful but they are still rendered unacceptable. The act of judging the latter case as unacceptable is based on non-linguistics considerations, which could be either socio-cultural or pragmatic in nature, where the communicative act does not happen in the real world. Gawron (2004) provides the following examples:

(4) a.Look at the cross-eyed elephant. (pragmatically acceptable)

   b.Look at the cross-eyed kindness. (pragmatically acceptable)

   c.*Look at the cross-eyed from. (syntactic ungrammaticality)

   d.*Strive for kind-ity. (morphological ungrammaticality)

According to Gawron (2004), both (4a) and (4b) are pragmatically acceptable. However, (4c) reflects syntactic ungrammaticality and (4d) represents morphological ungrammaticality.

For Alwi et al. (1998: 316-317), however, "A sentence must demand a semantic agreement since the semantic grammaticality and acceptability lies in the relationship between its sentence and the real-world as in:

(5) a. Horses are animals.

   b. *Horses are plants.

Sentence (5.a) is grammatical and acceptable since all horses are animals. In the real-world, however, all horses are not plants as in (5.b)", where semantic agreement is not realized. In my opinion, sentence (5.b) does not reflect reality, and therefore should be rendered unacceptable. (https://arieandrasyah.wordpress.com/2009/08/01/the-grammaticality-versus-the-acceptability/).

Furthermore, Alwi et al. (1998:317) cite two more examples to depict the relationship between acceptability and number agreement-- as a feature of grammaticality:

6. a) This man is rather unhappy.

   b) *This men is rather unhappy.

For them, sentence (6.a) is both grammatical and acceptable, while (6.b) is ungrammatical but acceptable for some speakers, and is meaningful. And while I agree with Alwi et al. (1998) on the grammaticality, meaningfulness and acceptability of sentence (6.a), I consider sentence (6.b) meaningful, but still unacceptable, as it does not fulfill the criteria of grammaticality. (https://arieandrasyah.wordpress.com/2009/08/01/the-grammaticality-versus-the-acceptability/).

Furthermore, (Ilmi et al. 2014) consider sentence 6 below acceptable because it is meaningful, although it is ungrammatical and does not conform to syntactic rules:

7) I want that he come,

     which has the same meaning as: "I want him to come"

For me, however, sentence 6 is unacceptable as it does not conform to the rules of grammar.

Gawron (2004) further argues that acceptability can occur in grammatical but false sentences, i.e., sentences which do not make sense as they lack truth:

8) Two plus two is five.

For me, grammaticality and meaningfulness expressed in sentence 8 above do not warrant acceptability since the sentence is inconsistent with reality. Consequently, meaning alone --like grammaticality-- does not render an utterance acceptable. In this case, acceptability is defined as a combination of both grammaticality and meaning, but not the product of one and not the other. (cf. Ilmi et al. 2014) retrieved from: https://www.slideshare.net/niimazroroilminadta/grammaticality-acceptability-and-meaningfullnes

In my opinion, understanding the speaker's intention, as Searle (1979) put it, requires that the utterance/speech act should be well formed and equally meaningful in order to be acceptable.

3.3 Grammaticality, Meaningfulness, and Acceptability

In the previous sections (3.1 and 3.2), neither grammaticality nor meaningfulness were enough to achieve acceptability in a communicative act according to the rules of standard academic English usage. It turns out that an ungrammatical but meaningful sentence, i.e., a sentence which makes sense, is unacceptable as it does not conform to grammatical rules, e.g., "I want that he come". On the other hand, a string of words may be grammatically well-formed, yet it does not form a meaningful sentence, as in: "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously". Furthermore, a sentence may be grammatical and meaningful but it still does not meet acceptability standards as it is unacceptable in a particular community or culture. In other words, unacceptability is being attributed to sociocultural considerations.

With this uncertainty about the criteria of judging acceptability, how should the acceptability of a sentence be determined? Obviously, there is no one definite answer to this question for the many interpretations of acceptability discussed above. Rather, a multiplicity of factors comes into play before a conclusive response is given. To elaborate, perhaps the question of acceptability can be best approached by consulting a number of key factors including:

1)   Context of situation: formal vs. informal

2)   Socio-cultural adequacy

As far as the first factor is concerned, distinction should be drawn between formal and informal situations. A formal situation of language use entails academic settings of formal education in academic institutions (i.e., academic articles), together with legal, political, and diplomatic discourse. In academic writing, for example, only formal language is used, while keeping away from colloquial, slang, or casual language. In this case, the purpose and audience determine our choice of the most accurate grammar and appropriate vocabulary. For instance, formal grammar will not allow the use of contractions, elliptical forms, or reduced forms.

Formal language use, therefore, presupposes strict adherence to the rules of grammar and proper use of lexis, while taking into account the context of situation, purpose and audience. The above-mentioned conditions meet the most stringent requirements of acceptability, which do not necessarily apply to all forms of discourse and speech acts, where less standardized forms of language use are exercised.

In view of the above, I am proposing a more practical formula and pragmatic approach to determining the three-fold relationship of grammaticality, meaningfulness, and acceptability. The formula takes into account three key variables in governing and organizing this relationship: (1) situation/context, (2) purpose, and (3) audience. These factors determine the degree of formality and consequently the notion of acceptability can be assessed. For example, papers presented in specialized international conferences and attended by scholars in the field can only be written in the most elaborate and sophisticated linguistic choices at all levels of structure, lexis, semantics, and mechanics of writing. The same applies to specialized peer-reviewed research journals where nothing but the top-most and highly elevated formal language can be sanctioned. Naturally, the criteria of situation, purpose, and readership belong to an elitist group of scholars for whom the power of language in its purist form cannot be compromised.

On the other hand, a personal letter addressed to a relative or friend does not warrant the use of an elaborate and formal style but, on the contrary, it will be written in an informal style which is similar to spoken conversation. Therefore, text messages --as an example of informal writing-- will not be linguistically thorough, but casual enough to use abbreviations, contractions and colloquialisms. Again the situation or context, purpose and audience do not warrant using an elaborate style of writing, which will look rather inappropriate in such situations. Interestingly, even individuals belonging to the first group of language specialists who are used to the formal style of writing in their specialized academic settings, are most likely to opt for the informal style in their personal letters and messages.

The fact that social media has drastically changed people's patterns of communication at all levels resulted in creating a new reality as far as the question of acceptability is concerned. The language of social media, especially chat acronyms and text message shorthand, which is fragmentary in nature, does not fit the standard pattern of discourse proper, namely formal language discourse. In the context of social media, only one form of language prevails, namely the informal which is characterized by the excessive use of abbreviations, contractions, acronyms, clippings, misspelling, and lexical innovations and coinages. For better or worse, this type of writing has been considered an acceptable pattern of communication among social media users. This kind of acceptability judgment is based on the pragmatic interpretation of language use where this informal pattern of language is practical enough to justify the use of language for instrumental purposes. In other words, this form of language is consistent with the context, purpose, and audience, where economy, brevity, and speed are maintained. According to Al-Salman (2017, p. 174), "the kind of discourse used in social media may be described as a special jargon featuring symbols, abbreviations, acronyms and numbers to create new words and to consequently open channels for private communication with users".

4. CONCLUSION

From a historical perspective, the relationship between grammaticality and meaning viz-à-viz the acceptability judgement of sentences and speech acts proved to be fuzzy and loosely defined. Grammaticality judgments do not have a systematic methodology as they are often intuitive in nature (cf. Schütze 2016). Different schools of linguistics have forged and framed their acceptability criteria to fit their prescribed models. For the proponents of Structuralism, well-formedness and adherence to the rules of grammatical usage were the benchmark for correctness, where the formal aspects of language were their ultimate concern. Thus, from a structuralist point of view, grammar and lexicon determine meaning. However, the absence of meaning from the strcturalists' frame of reference cast doubts on the adequacy of well-formedness alone as the standard of acceptability. In

addition, the grammaticality criterion was favored by Gawron (2004) who argues that acceptability can occur in grammatical but false sentences, i.e., sentences which do not make sense as they lack truth. This is in line with the thesis that grammaticality is more of a theoretical notion, whereas acceptability is an observational one (http://facultyoflanguage.blogspot.com/2013/02/acceptability-and-grammaticality.html).

For Austin (1975), however, an utterance has a meaning based on the intention, attitude and thoughts of the speaker and the response of the listener. In other words, the theory of language is based on the interactivity of action where meaningful language exchange comes into play. But as indicated in 3.2 above, meaning alone does not necessarily determine the acceptability of an utterance or speech act. A sentence may be well formed and semantically sound, but it lacks cultural or situational/contextual adequacy, or truth, and therefore is considered unacceptable

To conclude, the distinction between formal and functional/pragmatic constraints is hard to draw, and what is considered an acceptable language use by one user, may be considered unacceptable by another. There is no single yardstick or benchmark for measuring acceptability, which varies according to context/situation, purpose, and audience. Each group of users determines its own code of acceptability depending on context (formal vs. informal) and purpose. But after all, the social media language has created a reality which leans towards a more flexible descriptive approach to language use instead of a rigid prescriptive one where strict adherence to grammaticality, meaningfulness, context, purpose, and audience is the norm according to which acceptability is determined.

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