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A Structural Comparison Of English and Tongan

BY ERMEL J. MORTON

This paper presents a few of the most prominent differences between structure of Tongan that cause problems in the teaching of English to Tongans.

Many of the problems encountered by the Tongan in studying English arise from his attempts to transfer the patterns of Tongan structure over to the English, both in speaking and in writing. The result is that wherever the structure of his native language differs from that of English, he has difficulty and makes mistakes.

Since this paper is not designed to present a highly technical discussion of the subject, a minimum of the technical jargon of descriptive linguistics will be used. However, all of the material of the paper has been derived by the research methods of descriptive linguistics. To the linguist desiring a more detailed and technical description of the matters in this paper, the author's doctoral dissertation "A Descriptive Grammar of Tongan" will prove helpful.

At the outset it should be pointed out that the most basic structural difference between English and Tongan is that of the devices used to signal grammatical meaning. Some languages, including the so-

called highly synthetic or inflected languages, depend upon modification of the word to indicate grammatical

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concepts. For example, Spanish hablo "I speak" hable "I spoke" shows a change of grammatical meaning effected by use of a suffix. In English are found such inflections as see > saw > seen and as walk > walked > walking, etc. In all of these instances, the change in grammatical meaning is signalled by inflection of the word.

Another grammatical device used in many languages is that of allowing context to indicate the precise grammatical meaning with no change in the form of the word. The number of most nouns in Japanese, for example,

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is indicated by context; hako to inki-tsubo (hako "box", and to "and" and inkitsubo "inkstand") may mean either "the box and the inkstand" or "the boxes and the inkstand" depending upon the context. The Japanese language, except in a few instances, makes no overt distinction between singular and plural nouns, leaving the meaning to be inferred from context or the situation in which the nouns are used. With regard to English and Tongan, English makes use of context to a greater extent than Tongan, a structural difference that presents a number of problems to the Tongan learning English. Fortunately, however, the number of English nouns having the same form in singular as in plural is not too great and the extent of the problem is limited.

Function Words Used

Separate words, which may be designated as function words, convey grammatical concepts in a number of languages. Tongan belongs to this group of languages; in fact, the main grammatical device in Tongan is that of using function words to signal grammatical meaning.

The Tongan subject marker specifying subjects of transitive verbs is an instance of such a function word. If Sione "John" is to be used as a subject, it must be preceded by the

function word 'e as in the sentence: Na'e ui ia 'e Sione "John called him" (Na'e past tense marker, ui "to call," ia "him," 'e subject marker, and Sione "John"). In Japanese, the function word wa also marks subjects as in Watashi wa hon wo motte imasu "I have the book" (watashi "I," wa subject marker, hon "book," wo direct object or goal marker motte "have," and imasu present tense). As indicated, wa marks the subject and wo the direct object in this sentence. The 'e of Tongan and wa and wo of Japanese are separate words conveying grammatical meaning. The use of separate words is the third major type of grammatical device.

Word order, another type of contextual device, is also used to convey grammatical meaning in a number of languages including English. The well-known example of The dog bit the man as contrasted with The man bit the dog illustrates the use of word order in signalling the subject and object in the sentence. The change of subjects from dog to man and the change of goals or direct objects from man to dog is effected by a change of word order: the subject precedes the verb and the object follows it. Many languages use the device of word order to indicate the relationship of modifier to the word modified. English makes much more use of word order as a grammatical device than does Tongan.

Three Signalling Devices

Thus, to summarize, there are three major grammatical devices used in signalling grammatical meaning: inflection or changes made in the word, use of separate words or function words and use of context to signal meaning. However, since this paper is in no way an attempt to explain the types of grammatical devices used in languages generally, but is rather an attempt to point out the differences in the use of such grammatical devices by English and Tongan, the examples so far given will suffice to lay the groundwork for the discussion which follows.

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Comparison

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As has been previously stated, Tongan depends, for the most part, on function words to carry the grammatical concepts of the language. English, on the other hand, relies upon a mixture of grammatical devices and in this respect differs from Tongan in a number of ways. The devices used by Tongan include function words, inflection and, to a limited extent, word order. English uses function words, inflection, word order and context. The differences between Tongan and English with regard to types of grammatical devices used is best illustrated with a chart showing the type or types of device used in each language in conveying some of the major grammatical concepts. The chart is in no way intended to be exhaustive in treatment; it merely indicates the major types of grammatical device used in signalling some of the major grammatical concepts.

(See Chart Bottom Page 7)

It will be seen from the above chart that Tongan makes much more extensive use of function words in signalling grammatical concepts than does English. Of the nine grammatical concepts listed, three use function words exclusively in Tongan and three

I see with my eyes.

What do you hear with?

I hear with my ears.

Who do you go with?

I go with _____.

Students may practice in pairs or groups with one asking the question and another answering.

After the voiceless [θ] has been studied, its voiceless counterpart [θ̥] may be introduced. Mouth and tongue position remain the same; the difference is in voicing. This is done by vibrating the vocal bands. Students can, by placing their hands over their ear or upon their throats, feel this difference quite effectively.

Of English and Tongan

others make fairly prominent use of function words. In no grammatical category of English are function words the sole device used and in only four of them do function words play a part.

To be sure, both Tongan and English make use of conjunctions and prepositions of the traditional sort; however, English has a greater variety of such prepositions. Among the Tongan traditional prepositions may be listed ki "to," mei "from" and i "in or at". The possessive preposition 'o "of" with its allomorphic form 'a "of" also follows the traditional pattern of prepositions and parallels English in its usage. Many features of Tongan conjunctions and their use are similar to those of English although there are

some differences too. The Tongan conjunctions pea "and", mo "and" and 'o "and" all may be followed directly by a pronoun subject in a number of situations where the pronoun would be omitted in English. For example, the English sentence He stood up and left may be expressed in Tongan as Na'a ne tu'u 'o ne 'alu (Na'a past tense, ne "he," tu'u "stand up," 'o "and," ne "he," and 'alu "go"). Although we can say in English He stood up and he left such a usage is rare; in Tongan, however, Na'a ne tu'u 'p ne 'alu is quite common. Consequently, a Tongan will be inclined to repeat the pronoun subject where it is unnecessary and perhaps even a bit awkward in English.

(To be continued in
Volume 2, No. 1)

Dr. Morton's dissertation is available from: University Microfilms, Inc.
P.O. Box 1346, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106

Grammatical Concept	Tongan	English
Tense	Function words	Inflection and Function words
Voice	Presence or absence of subject (i.e., context)	Inflection and Function Words
Verbal aspect	Use of verbs as nominals with possessive pronouns and use of function words	Inflection and Function Words
Comparison (Adjectives and adverbs)	Function words	Inflection and function words
Noun subjects and objects (function)	Function words	Word order
Pronoun subjects and objects	Function words and inflection	Inflection and word order
Possessive case of nouns	Prepositional phrase modifier	Inflection
Possessive case of pronouns	Inflection	Inflection
Modification	Function words, position and one inflectional suffix	Position (context)