

Formal and Notional Differences in Utterances: A Critical Overview

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Abstract

This article critically reviews the ideas presented by Jespersen on formal and notional differences in expressions. This review aims to explore the interplay between formal and notional variations in utterances, examining how these distinctions influence communication and interpretation. While formal consistency ensures clarity and adherence to linguistic rules, notional flexibility allows for adaptation to diverse contexts, intentions, and interpretations. The review highlights matches and mismatches between formal and notional categories not only from English but also from Nepali and Limbu languages. The review concludes that the form-notion relationship is either divergent, convergent or sometimes overlapping. Understanding these relationships enhances our grasp of language as a tool for both structured expression and nuanced meaning.

Key words: Grammatical concepts, utterances, notion, syntax, semantics

Introduction

Jens Otto Harry Jespersen, one of the important figures in the late 19th Century pan-European Reform Movement in modern language teaching, was born on 16 July 1860. During the 1890s, Jespersen continued to be the best-known as a language-teaching reformer. His pioneering treatments of (English) syntax and the history of language were mostly published in the twentieth century. His emphasis on 'meaning' or 'function' as fundamental to 'form' continued to represent a refreshingly humane alternative to the predominantly form-focused views that dominated linguistics in the twentieth century.

The outside world, as reflected in the human mind, is extremely complicated, and it is not to be expected that men should always have stumbled upon the simplest or the most precise way of denoting the myriads of phenomena and the manifold relations between them that call for communication. The correspondence between external and grammatical categories is therefore never

complete, and we find the most curious and unexpected overlapping and intersections everywhere. One concrete example illustrated and analyzed by Jespersen is presented as follows:

- Man is mortal.
- Men were deceivers ever.

If these sentences are analyzed grammatically, we see that (apart from the different predicates) they differ in that one is in the singular, the other in the plural number, and that one is in the present tense, the other in the preterit or past tense. Yet both sentences predicate something about a whole class, only the class is different in the two sentences: in the former it is mankind without regard to sex, in the latter the male part of mankind only, a sex-distinction being thus implied in what is grammatically a numerical distinction. And though the tenses are different, no real distinction of time is meant, for the former, truth is not meant to be confined to the present moment, nor the second to sometime in the past. What is independent in both is a statement that pays no regard to the distinction between now and then, something meant to be true for all time.

We are thus led to recognize that besides, or above, or behind, the syntactic categories which depend on the structure of each language as it is found, there are some extra lingual categories that are independent of the more or less as they apply to all languages, though rarely expressed in them clearly and unmistakably. Gender is a syntactic category in such languages as Latin, French, and German; the corresponding natural or notional category is sex: sex exists in the world of reality, but it is not always expressed in language, not even in those languages which, like Latin, French, or German, have a system of grammatical genders which agrees in many ways with the natural distinction of sexes.

The above example of gender and sex makes it clear that the relation between the syntactic and notional categories will often present a similar kind of network to that noticed between formal and syntactic categories. We have thus, in reality, arrived at a threefold division, three stages of grammatical treatment of the same phenomena, or three points of view from which grammatical facts may be considered: 'Form- Function-Notion'. To present these ideas in a more crystal clear way, some defining basic concepts related to the formal and notional categories are also discussed here.

Grammatical Concepts

The single word expresses either a single concept or a combination of concepts so as to form a psychological unit. The nature of the world of concepts is reflected and systematized in linguistic structure. A single word or sentence involves various kinds of distinct and fundamental concepts that are brought into connection with each other in several ways. In a word, the fundamental relational concepts of concrete order in a sentence or linguistic expression can be termed a grammatical concept.

Grammatical concepts range from simple subject-verb agreements to syntactically complex structures. The range of resources in this section includes a wide variety of grammar-related topics, but they could be all applied to a pedagogical context.

Grammatical Category

A *grammatical category* is a class of units (such as nouns and verbs) or features (such as numbers and cases) that share a common set of grammatical properties. The term *category* refers to the classes themselves e.g., noun, verb, subject, predicate, noun phrase, verb phrase. More specifically, it refers to the defining properties of these general units: the categories of the noun, for example, include the number, gender, case, and accountability of the verb, tense, aspect, voice, etc. A distinction is often made between **grammatical categories**, in this second sense, and *grammatical functions* (or *functional categories*), such as subject, object, complement."

A **grammatical categories** are the building blocks of linguistic structure. They are sometimes called 'lexical categories' since many forms can be specified for their grammatical category in the lexicon. Grammatical category is a linguistic category that has the effect of modifying the forms of some class of words in a language. The words of an everyday language are divided up into several word classes, or parts of speech, such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. It often happens that the words in a given class exhibit two or more forms used in somewhat different grammatical circumstances. In each such case, this variation in form is required by the presence in the language of one or more **grammatical categories** applying to that class of words (Lyons, 1971)

English nouns are affected by only one grammatical category, that of number; we have singular 'dog' but plural 'dogs', and go on for most (but not all) of the nouns in the language. These forms are not interchangeable and each must be used always and only in specified grammatical circumstances. English adjectives vary for the grammatical category of degree, as with big/ bigger/biggest, and yet again only one of the three forms is possible in a given position. Similarly, English verbs exhibit the category of tenses, as with love/loved, work/worked, see/saw, etc. Some grammatical categories, like number and tense, are extremely widespread in the world's languages while others are unusual and confined to a few languages.

Thus, it is important to keep in mind that a **grammatical category** is a linguistic, not a real-world, category and that there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between the two, though they are usually closely related. For example, 'tense' is a linguistic category, while 'time' is a category of the world. While past tense usually expresses past time (as in *I saw a movie last night*), the past-tense auxiliary in the following expresses future time: *I wish you would go*. And the present-tense verb *I leave tomorrow* expresses future time."

Notional Category

Notions are extra-linguistics categories that have nothing to do with the facts of language. They exist only in theory or as an idea, but not in reality. They are assumed to apply to all language, so they are universal. Notional categories are the ideational categories besides the language-specific structure-dependent syntactic categories. They are usually universal and external to particular languages, therefore termed as 'extra-lingual categories' (Jespersen, 1924, p.57).

So, Jespersen's focus is that we must start with meaning and investigate how particular grammatical *notions* are expressed, as distinct from morphology, which starts from the form and asks what it stands for. Grammatical categories such as negation and tense are, then, seen in a completely new way. Earlier, Jespersen had brought together his interests in syntax and the history of language. Everywhere in his work, he distinguishes carefully between form and function. The task of linguists is to review/identify the major functional categories in so far as they find grammatical expression and to investigate the mutual relation of these two 'words' in various languages.

Purpose of the Study

In this study, I have observed the form-function-notion of grammatical expressions of any natural language. To make the concepts more clear, I have presented some examples of grammatical and notional categories and their matches and mismatches from English-Nepali-Limbu languages. In this systematic critical review, my first attempt was to present the brief concepts- grammatical concepts, grammatical category, and notional category. And, the second purpose was to explore the interplay between formal and notional variations in utterances in various natural languages like English, Nepali, or Limbu language etc.

Research Questions

- How do formal utterances differ in terms of lexical density and complexity compared to notional utterances?
- To what extent do formal and notional utterances converge or diverge or overlap in terms of function and purpose?

Methodology

This review article was prepared by systematically analyzing peer-reviewed research papers on Jespersen's formal and notional categories to synthesize the insights on form-function- notion. The study was guided by the question -to what extent formal and notional utterances converge or diverge or overlap in terms of function. With the support of Jespersen's book 'The Philosophy of Grammar' and research papers related to Jespersen's analysis of formal and notional categories, I synthesized the ideas. Moreover, I also collected some data from Nepali and Limbu

languages and have analyzed how the formal and notional categories are different and bring differences in meaning with the collocation of words or sometimes how grammatical forms and their notional categories are closely interconnected, may or may not have a one-to-one correspondence between them.

Findings and Discussions

Match and Mismatches between formal and notional categories

Jespersen's discussion of matches and mismatches between formal and notional categories goes far beyond merely noting obvious points such as that all three genders in German include words denoting men, words denoting women, and words denoting things other than human beings.

All the syntactic ideas and categories can be established without for one moment stepping outside the province of grammar, but as soon as we ask the question, of what they stand for, we at once pass from the sphere of language to the outside world. This 'outside world' is mirrored in the human mind or in the sphere of thought. Some of the categories enumerated above such as the category of numbers (singular and plural), the category of cases (nominative, accusative, dative, genitive, etc), the category of tenses (present, preterit- imperfect/ perfect, and future, etc), the category of moods (indicative, subjunctive, optative, imperative), category of voices (active, passive and middle voice, category of persons (first, second and third person) and the category of genders (masculine, feminine and neuter) bear evident relations to something that is found in the sphere of things: thus the grammatical category of number evidently corresponds to the distinction found in the outside world between ' one' and ' more than one'; to account for the various grammatical tenses, present, imperfect, etc., one must refer to the outside notion of ' time'; the difference between the three grammatical persons corresponds to the natural distinction between the speaker, the person has spoken to, and something outside of both.

In the book 'The Philosophy of Grammar', Jespersen provides a critical examination of a large number of grammatical concepts, distinguishing clearly among notions that linguists often confuse even today such as the notions of 'subject', 'topic,' and 'agent'- 'The green leaf is my favorite- *topic and subject*', 'The monkey destroyed crop- *agent and subject*' and 'There are monkeys destroying everything- *agent and topic*'. Many scholars even Leonard Bloomfield could not keep straight and pay attention to a far broader range of examples than scholars of his time or even or ours were accustomed to dealing with. He notices the implications of details in standard definitions and shows how they often misrepresent the facts. For example, the traditional definition of a third person as 'person or thing spoken of' is inaccurate, since one still uses first and second person forms when speaking about oneself or one's addressee; here an accurate definition must be negative: 'does not include speaker or addressee', and even that definition must be qualified to allow for forms such as your humble servant and madam that are 'notionally' first

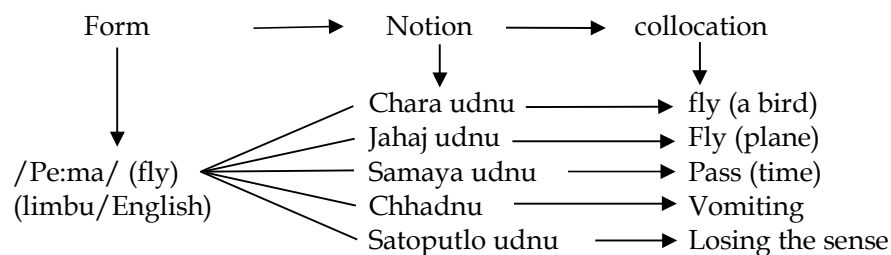
and second person but ‘formally’ third person.

Formal grammar describes the structure of individual sentences and sets language as a set of rules that allow or disallow certain sentence structure. A grammatical category is a class of units (such as nouns and verbs) or features (such as numbers and cases) that share a common set of grammatical properties. So far grammatical category is concerned; it involves the study of morphology (a form of word/s) and syntax (a form of sentence/s). A notional category is a concept related to meaning or function. In a linguistic study, the notional category refers to the meaning or function that a form conveys.

Here, I have presented the differences between grammatical concepts and notional categories that they refer to at the collocational level. For this, I gathered some Limbu verbs of shaking, flying, pushing and cutting and tried to show their Form-Function-Notion relationship. Then, I have exemplified how one form may have many notions and just vice-versa when they occur with different co-occurring elements, contexts, and genders.

Examples from Limbu, Nepali and English Language:

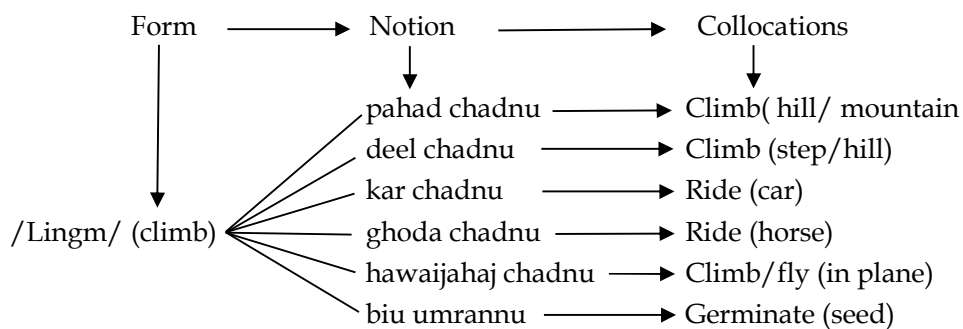
Example 1: Limbu, Nepali and English -Verb of flying



Analysis of the Limbu verb /pe:ma/ formally and notionally:

The aforementioned figure shows the grammatical form of Limbu verb /pema/ in English ‘fly’ may have several notional categories. In Limbu, the verb /pe:ma/ form has many forms based on different collocational entities. For example, when the same /pe:ma/ word co-occurs with ‘ a bird/ a plane’ as in ‘chara/ hawajjahaj udnu’, it gives the meaning of ‘ flying a bird/ flying a plane’. When it co-occurs with ‘time’ as in ‘samay janu’, it conveys the meaning ‘passing the time. Similarly, when it comes in connection to ‘chadnu’, the same term /pe:ma/ is used to refer to ‘vomiting’. Furthermore, when it co-occurs in collocation with ‘our sense’ as in ‘satoputlo udnu’ in Nepali, the same form /pe:ma/ like in ‘aasamin pe:ro’ (my sense is gone) can be used.

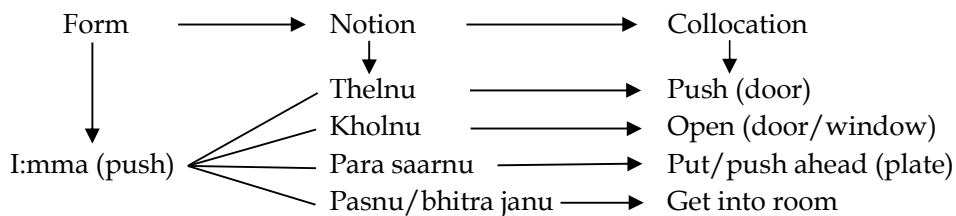
Example -2: Verb of climbing/lingm/ (in Limbu,Nepali and English)



Analysis of climbing verb /lingm/ formally and notionally:

The above figure shows the same one-to-many form-function relation. The same form has different notions on the basis of different word sequences or collocations. For example, formally the same Limbu verb /lingam/ reflects multifold notions in different collocations.

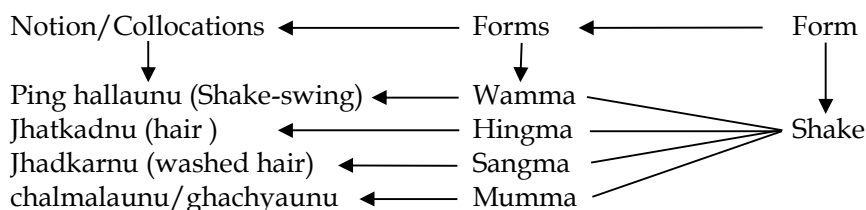
Example 3: Verb of pushing /i:mma/ (in Limbu, Nepali and English)



Analysis of Limbu verb /i:mma/ formally and notionally:

As in figure 1 and 2, this figure also shows the same one form and multi notions of the verb /i:mma/.In limbu language, when the verb /i:mma/ comes in collocation with 'door/window' as in Nepali 'dhoka thelnu or kholnu', it conveys the meaning ' push the door'.And when it occurs with 'plate/book etc' as in 'para sarnu'in English pushing ahead, in such sense also, the same verb /i:mma/ can be used.

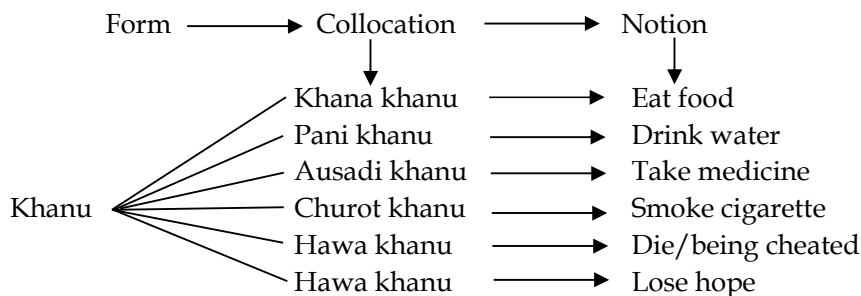
Example 4: Verb of shaking (English, Limbu and Nepali)



Analysis of shaking verb 'shake' formally and notionally:

Here, to refer to the same English verb 'shake' many Limbu verb forms have been used in connection to different collocational words to refer to multiple notions. For example, for the word 'shake', the term /wamma/ can be used in Limbu when it occurs with 'swing' as in 'ping hallaunu' in Nepali for the meaning 'shaking the swing'. Similarly, for the same English verb 'shake', we can use /hingma or sangma/ to refer to the Nepali meaning of 'jhadkarnu' when it comes in the collocational context of 'hair or clothes'. And, another is the term /mumma/ that can be used to refer to the 'shake' when it co-occurs with 'ghajyaunu'. It shows the many-to-one form notion relationship.

Example 5: Verb of eating (only from Nepali and English)



Analysis of 'khanu' Nepali verb formally and notionally:

In the above example, the same form reflects different notions when it is collocated with different words. The verb 'khanu' means 'to eat' and has several different meanings in different word sequences. For example, when it co-occurs with 'khana' as in 'khana khanu', it conveys the meaning 'to eat'. Similarly, when it co-occurs with 'paani' as in 'paani khanu', it has a meaning 'to drink' and when co-occurs with 'churot' as in 'churot khanu', it gives the 'to smoke'. And, when it occurs in a sequence with 'hawa' as in 'hawa khanu', it refers to 'dying or being cheated' and occurs with 'ausadhi' as in 'ausadhi khanu', it has meaning 'to take'. Moreover, when 'khanu' co-occurs with 'kasam' as in 'kasam khanu', it has a

meaning 'to swear'. It shows an example of one-to-many form-notion relationship where there is a state of divergence in the use of the verb 'khanu' and on its notions.

Conclusion

Jespersen has well discussed the notional categories they correspond to and the details of matches and mismatches between the various formal categories and their notional counterparts. His view of notional categories is quite reminiscent and he regards notional categories as existing only by virtue of the role that play in languages and as being open to interrelated linguistic variation. Thus, the analysis of Jespersen and the examples I presented conclude that the relationship of form and function doesn't demonstrate the systematic and rule-governed pattern. There is always no one-to-one correspondence between the form and the notion of an utterance in a language. The relationship is seen as either divergent or convergent or sometimes overlapping too. This sort of relation in formal and notional categories of language can be found in all the natural languages because it is shown not only in the discussion of Jespersen but in the examples that I drew from the Limbu language and Nepali language as well show the same output. In a word, such a two-way or inclusive form-notion relationship of any linguistic expression needs to be well considered.

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