PROBLEMS IN LEARNING SYNTACTIC ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE AND REMEDIAL TEACHING MEASURES

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Abstract

The scope of this paper falls under the sub-topic "Modern Trends in Teaching Tamil Grammar" of the present seminar. This paper describes the concept of language learning and concept of syntactic aspects of language, general problems faced while learning syntactic aspects w.r.t. Tamil language along with remedial teaching measures. The main aim of this article is to list out general problems encountered by second language learners in learning syntactic aspects of language w.r.t. Tamil and to provide pertinent teaching measures to overcome the problems. The syntax is the part of grammar. Therefore while teaching Tamil grammar; the emphasis of teaching should be on the functional grammar (application level) rather than the mastering structure (knowledge level) of the traditional grammar. It is better to focus on the meaning and use than on the form. This will pave a way to reduce the learning difficulties.

Keywords: Language Learning, Syntactic, Tamil Language, Teaching Measures

Introduction

Teaching, learning, and evaluation are the parts of continuous processes. Teaching is mainly an outcome of a teacher's perception. Philosophy of teaching revolves around one's understanding about how students learn, what type of instructions are the best suitable for deep and concrete learning, what actions should be taken to enact such instructions.

Language teaching can be defined as the "activities which are intended to bring about language learning". Since the language teaching is to bring about language learning, a theory of language teaching always implies concepts of language learning. (H.H.Stern, 1983)[1]. It is a practice of creating an environment conducive to language learning by the use of appropriate instructional methodologies. Teaching relies on the different methods of teaching.

"Teaching methods which could be defined as the systematic organisation of activities that result in learning and thus in the achievement of the desired objectives of instruction" (H.S.Srivastava, 1999)[2].

The learner usually finds certain areas of target language easy and other areas very difficult to learn. To teach effectively and to bring the conducive atmosphere in teaching-learning process and it becomes necessary to find out the difficulties encountered by the learners at the every level or stage of teaching. Generally language teaching includes teaching the structure and nature of the language concerned (i.e., grammar teaching) and also developing proficiency in the four basic skills of the language. Since it is a vast area, an attempt has been made only to identify the syntactic problems faced by the learners.

For this purpose, the teacher learners who are learning Tamil as second language at Southern Regional Language Centre, Central Institute of Indian Languages,[a] Mysore are considered as the target group for collecting data. It is a heterogeneous group and whose mother tongue is Kannada, Malayalam, and Hindi. This course was designed for a period of 10 months and consists of three levels, Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced.

The concept of Learning in General

Learning in general is defined as acquiring knowledge and skill through experience or extensive reading or practice or formal instruction, etc., by modifying an individual behavior in any field of scholarly application. According to Stern[1] (1983) the concept of learning has been greatly influenced by the psychological study of the learning process. The psychological concept of learning goes far beyond learning. It includes not only the acquisition of knowledge, it also refers to learning to learn and learning to think; the modifications of attitudes; the acquisition of interests, social values or social roles, and even changes in personality.

The concept of Language Learning

Language learning may refer to the process by which human beings learn a language that is, either their native tongue or a foreign language i.e., language other than their mother tongue. It may be 'acquisition' i.e., language learnt in an uncontrolled natural process or 'learning' i.e., a structured one that takes place in a systematic manner with the help of a teacher.

Learning the second language is defined as acquiring the ability to use its structure within a general vocabulary under essentially the conditions of normal communication among native speakers at conversational speed (Lado, 1964)[3]. Second language learning implies a formal

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[a] <u>Central Institute of Indian Languages</u>, is a premier Institute established under Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India. One of its responsibility is teaching major Indian languages as second language to the teachers across the country as a pre-requisite to implement three language formula through its 7 Regional Language Centres located in different parts of this country. Southern Regional Language Centre (SRLC) is one of the 7 Regional Language Centres functioning under Central Institute of Indian Languages and involved in the teaching / training of the four south Indian languages viz., Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu as second language (L2).

learning situation with feedback, error correction, rule learning and an artificial linguistic environment that introduces an aspect of the grammar at a time.

Syntactic Aspects of Language

Syntax a branch of linguistics, is the study about the structure of sentences (arrangement of (language) elements in a meaningful pattern). At this juncture, it is relevant to explore the distinction between grammar and syntax. In fact, grammar is a wholesome unit of a language which includes phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. The syntax is only a part of it dealing with the different parts of a sentence and the inter and intra relationship among them. Therefore, syntax is the scientific study of how sentences are formed in a given language. It is concerned with sentence formation and word order including the phrases and clauses. Sentence is considered as arrangement of language elements to form a relatively large structure and which gives complete meaning. Words are considered important to construct the sentence. Phone, phoneme, morpheme, words, phrases, clauses are considered as the elements of the sentence. By arranging them under certain rules, one can produce indefinite number of meaningful sentences with limited lexical items, for conveying the message / information.

The chart given below shows the structural elements of syntactic structure in language that are dealtwith as major, minor, sub, micro components (Ref. General Frame of Reference : Language, Literature, and Personality, 2002)
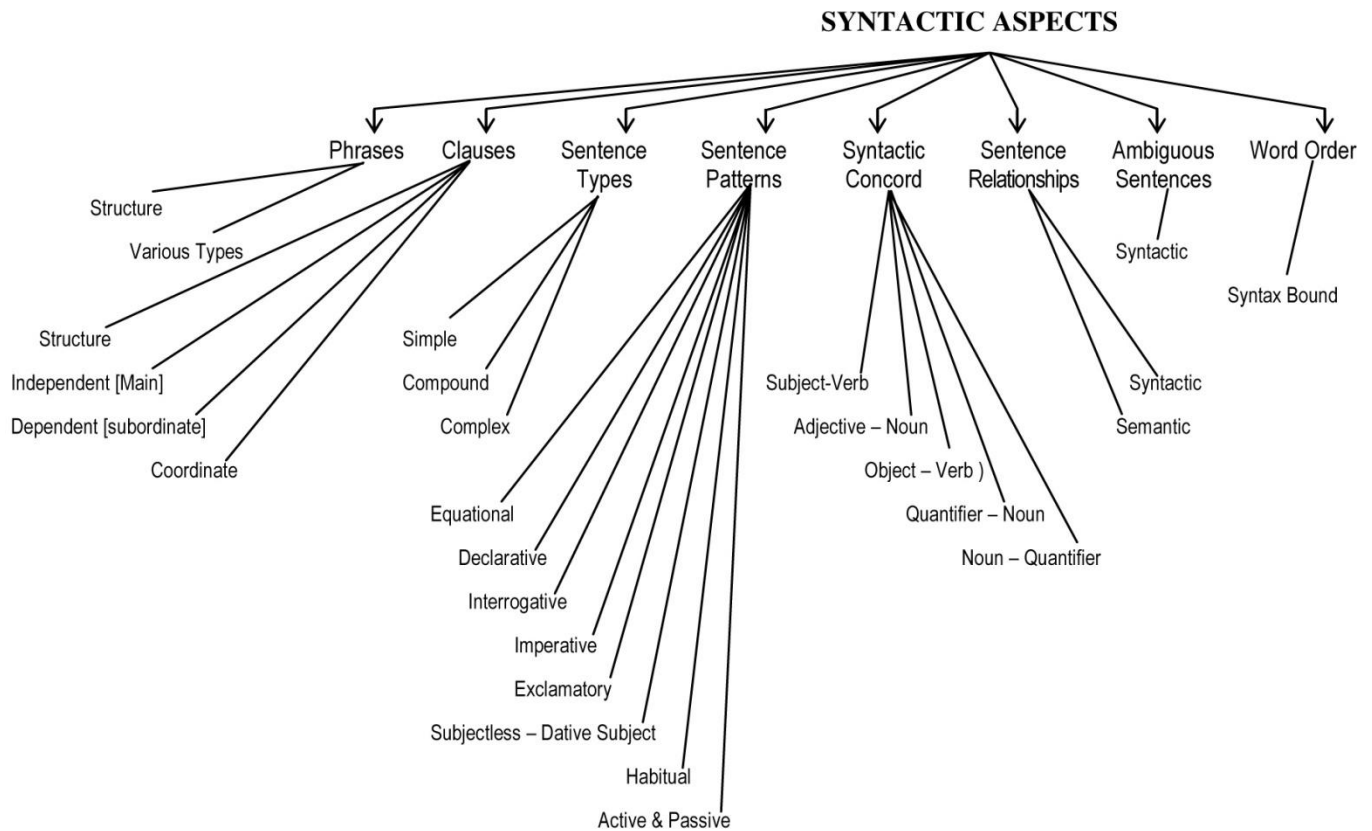
Chart 1: Structural Elements of Syntactic Structure in Language

Learning Syntactic aspects

It includes learning about the knowledge of the structure and nature of the syntactic aspects of language concerned. The structure part includes all the components listed in the above chart of syntactic aspects. The nature or the dimensional factors[b] (Subbiah Pon, 2008)[4] include form[c], boundary[d], structure[e], function[f], and meaning[g] of each of the structural unit listed in chart. It is

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[b] The properties that are associated with the structural elements (i.e., phrase, clause, sentence, etc.) are dimensions. In other words the elements that constitute the concept of characteristics are dimensions.

[c] Form : the external appearance of a syntactic unit; also it refers to an 'integral whole' with its components organised in a particular way

[d] Boundary : it refers to the space and punctuation marks used to separate one unit of language from the other e.g., space ' ', marks - ?, !, etc. ; also the boundary duly represented by its markers implies the nature of language unit bounded by them

presumed that the competence over the structure and nature part of the syntactic aspects is said to be a mastery over the syntactic aspects of language. Therefore it may be perceived that these components along with dimensional factors are said to be the content inputs for teaching as well as testing syntactic aspects. The problems encountered while learning these components may be considered to be syntactic problems.

Syntactic problems encountered

Since, learning a second language, normally starts at a later stage, when performance in one language has already become established, the learners may face difficulties while acquiring target language. It is necessary to state that the problems encountered by the second language learners are potentially important for the understanding of the process of second language learning as well as teaching. As far as linguistic competency is concerned, the second language learners generally have difficulties in learning certain aspects of phonology, morphology, and syntax. In the present context, some of the learning problems in learning syntactic aspects are described.

For identifying the problems in learning syntactic aspects of L_2 learners who are learning Tamil as second language, the researcher collected the data from the professional teachers (who are involved in teaching Tamil as L_2) through a direct interview, from the teacher trainees through interaction and test administration. After analyzing all the data samples, it is found that the following are some of the syntactic problems encountered by L_2 learners :

Word order

It is placing of words in a sequence according to the conventions of a given language. This refers not only to sentence parts such as subject, object, verb, but also to word order in noun phrases or verb phrases. Tamil is a consistently verb-final language. The verb comes at the end of the clause, with a typical word order of subject, object, verb. However, the phrasal order in Tamil is flexible.

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[e] Structure : it refers to the sequence in which the words are arranged to form a phrase or clause or sentence e,g., the grammatical structure of a phrase or clause or sentence i.e., elements *venru* and *vantaan* arranged in a VP + Verb sequence to form a verb phrase; also it refers to a predetermined model or set framework; particular / regular way the language units are grouped together e.g., 'vp + verb' is a pattern of verb phrase)

[f] Function : Perceived as a combination of 'use' and 'usage' of an entity / object. In language, 'use' refers to the basic role of an element in language operation e.g., verb phrase plays the role of 'predicate' in sentence. 'Usage' refers to the manner in which a language unit is handled in contexts to achieve different purposes e.g., the phrase *'cenru vaa'* in *'kaNNaa ! niiyee cenru vaa',* plays a predicate role in addition to fulfilling imperative purpose.

[g] Meaning : it refers to the meaning that a language unit or group of words convey in isolation (lexical, direct, etc.) e.g., *rojaa puu* ; also the 'sense' that a language unit or group of words intend to convey in a context (idiomatic, metaphorical, connotative, etc.) e.g., *avan kaatil puu currinaan*.

In the arrangement of the words, the learners have problems especially for the non-cognate group (whose MT is not Dravidian). While writing and also while interacting they tend to inter change the word order

E.g., வீட்டுக்கு போனேன் நான் (OVS order). *viiTTukku pooṉeeṉ naaṉ*.

போனேன் நான் வீட்டுக்கு. *pooṉeeṉ naaṉ viiTTukku* 'I went home.'

This can be corrected like this நான் வீட்டுக்கு போனேன். *naaṉ viiTTukku pooṉeeṉ*. 'I went home' Since the phrasal order in Tamil is flexible, and changing the order of words makes no difference to the meaning of the sentence. Though meaning is conveyed, it is grammatically incorrect. But this is admissible only for few contexts. In all the contexts this will not do. For instance, in Tamil language, the sentence can be expanded by using attributes and other grammatical categories that describes or modifies subject or object or predicate. When the word order of this kind of sentence is changed, the meaning will be lost. E.g., பார்ப்பேன் நான் விரும்பிப் படங்களை நகைச்சுவை in which meaning is not conveyed properly. *paarppeeṉ naaṉ virumpip paTaṅkalai nakaiccuvai*. The correct sequence of the above sentence will be *naaṉ nakaiccuvaip paTaṅkalai virumpip paarppeeṉ* 'I would like to watch the humorous movies'. Therefore word order or sequence is very important. This kind of problem is said to be the problem w.r.to. structure.

Case markers

It is a grammatical category of a noun, or similarly inflected word such as a pronoun, adjective, indicating its relationship to other words in a sentence. In the sentence construction, the role of case markers is very important. It indicates the relationship between the subject, object, and predicate. In Tamil language, case markers have variety of functions and for syntax the case system is very essential.

While constructing the sentences whether it may be spoken or written, they often have problems in using case system in the sentence. Problem of replacing one case with another,

E.g., நான் <u>அவனுக்குப்</u> பார்த்தேன் *naaṉ avanukku paartteeṉ* 'I saw him'.

Here dative case is used instead of accusative one. It can be corrected by replacing case marker நான் அவனைப் பார்த்தேன். *naaṉ avaṉai paartteeṉ* 'I saw him'

<u>வகுப்புக்கு</u> ஆங்கிலம் பேசாதே. *vakuppukku aaṅkilam peecaatee* 'Don't speak English in class'. Here also instead of locative case dative case is used. It can be corrected by replacing locative case marker i.e., வகுப்பில் ஆங்கிலம் பேசாதே. *vakuppil aaṅkilam peecaatee* 'don't speak English in class'. Another kind of case <u>கண்ணிலிருந்து</u> பார்க்கிறேன். *kaNNiliruntu paarkkireeṉ* ' I saw from eye'. Instead of using instrumental case used locative one. It can be corrected as கண்ணால் பார்க்கிறேன். *kaNNaal paarkkireeṉ*. ' I saw through eye'.

It is also found that, while constructing the sentence, the learners have the problem of deleting case markers. E.g., என் தங்கை <u>வீட்டு</u> வெளியே விளையாடுவாள். *en taṅkai viiTTu veLiyee viLaiyaaTuvaal* 'My sister will play outside the house' where the dative case –ku is excluded from the underlined word. E.g., நான் என் <u>மாணவன்</u> நிறைய மதிப்பெண் கொடுக்கமாட்டேன். *naan en maaNavan niraiya matippen koTukkamaaTTeen* 'I will not give more marks to my student'. Here also the case –ku is excluded in the underlined word.

Also they have the problem of using case marker where it is not necessary. E.g., <u>அம்மாவுக்கு</u> கோபப்பட்டு பையனைத் திட்டினாள். *ammaavukku koopapaTTu paiyanai tiTTinaaL.* 'mother got angry and scolded her son'. Here in the underlined word the case marker is used where it is not necessary.

It is found that due to the influence of their mother tongue, the learners have this kind of problems. Most of the learners of this group of Kannada speakers so they have problem in using the above said case markers. In Kannada though the case –ge has inbuilt function of dative, it can be used as accusative also e.g., *raamanu <u>nanage</u> hodeda.* 'rama beat me' *raamanu <u>uurige</u> hooda.* 'rama went to town.' The locative case –*inta* can also be used as instrumental one e.g., *kanninda noodite* 'I saw through the eye'; <u>*maneyinda baruttiddeene*</u> 'I am coming from home'. Always they have this kind of confusion and tend to make mistakes. The teachers also opined the same. The learners also agree with this statement. Here the problem lies on the 'form', 'structure', and 'function'.

Agreement / Concord

It is a concordance in form or grammatical category of two or more items which indicates a specific syntactic relationship. The agreement or concordance between subject and predicate. In some languages adjectives have to agree with the nouns they qualify e.g., in Hindi *'acci latki' 'accaa latkaa.* In Tamil there is an agreement between subject and predicative with the PNG markers i.e., the predicate must agree with subject in person, number, and gender.

The learners have problem in subject and predicate concordance of PNG markers, I and II person oblique forms, tense markers.

PNG markers : <u>நீங்க</u> வீட்டிலே <u>இருக்குறாங்க</u>. *niṅka viiTTilee irukkuraaṅka.* 'you are present in your house'. Here the pronominal suffix 'person' is not matching i.e., the subject is II person and in the verb the III person pronominal suffix has been used. Likewise we have many examples நாங்க ஆசிரியரா இருக்கிறேன். *naaṅka aaciriyaraa irukkireen.* 'we are teachers'. Here the pronominal suffix does not agree with the subject in number. Either the subject *naaṅka* may changed with *naan* or *irukkireen* with *irukkiroom*

I & II person oblique form : <u>நாங்களுக்கு</u> தெரியும். *naaṅkaLukku teriyum* 'we know'. <u>நீங்களோட</u> ஊருக்கு போங்க. *niṅkaLooTa uurukku pooṅka.* 'you (hon.) go to your village'.

In Tamil, for I & II person pronoun the case is inflected for its oblique form i.e., when case marker is added to I & II person pronoun it should be changed into oblique form i.e., *'naaṅkaL'* will become *'eṅkaL'*. Most of the Hindi speakers and a few Kannada speakers make this kind of mistakes (Agesthialingom,S. & Rajasekharan Nair,N., 1981)[5].

Tense markers : a. நான் நேற்று வருவேன். *naan neerru varuveen.* 'I came yesterday'; b. அவன் நேற்று பார்க்கிறான். *avan neerru paarkkiraan.* 'He saw yesterday'. Likewise the learners have problems in using tense. Here the adverb does not agree with the tense marker where '*neerru*' is a time adverb of 'past' but the tense marker used in the sentence (a) is 'future' and tense marker in the sentence (b) is 'present'.

It may be noted that this kind of problems are due to the over generalisations of target language rule, lack of learning, and mother tongue interference. Here the crux of the problem lies on the form & structure.

Incomplete sentences

Tamil is a verb ending language and verb occurs at the end of the sentence. The grammatical categories finite verb, imperative, question words, noun, etc., are used to complete the sentence. The non-finite verbs will show the incompleteness of the sentence. The learners have a problem of using verbal participle at the end of the sentence. E.g., அவன் வந்து. *avan vantu.* 'he came'; அவன் பார்த்து *avan paarttu* 'he saw'. Likewise they tend to produce incomplete sentences. This is also due to the mother tongue influence. Most of the learners whose mother tongue is Malayalam will have these problems. In Malayalam the verb ends like *vannu, pooyi,* etc. In one occasion, the learners whose mother tongue is Kannada have this kind of problem i.e., in Kannada *'banta'* 'came' is used RP as well as finite verb. Therefore, this makes them to commit this kind of mistakes. This sort of issues may be brought under the problem w.r.t. structure.

Exclusive and inclusive forms

These forms are used to express 'exclusiveness' and 'inclusiveness' of I person. In Tamil we have separate forms for 'exclusive' and 'inclusive' viz., நாங்கள் , நாம். But in Kannada language there is no separate form and both will be indicated by using one form '*naavu*'. Here they have a confusion and to indicate the 'inclusive' also they use '*naaṅkaL*' the exclusive form in a sentence. This kind of errors are said to be problem w.r.t. 'form'.

Conjunctions

The coordinating conjunctions are used to link together words or sentence parts or sentences of equal rank or status. In Tamil, the coordinating conjunctions *'aanaal'* and *'atanaal'* are used. The learners are having problem in using these two conjunctions. They often confuse, it seems the external appearance of the form and the utterance are similar. They use *'aanaal'* where

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'atanaal' is to be used and vice versa. The external appearance and utterance makes some kind of confusion and they tend to make this kind of mistakes. This is due to induced mistakes and it is problem w.r.t. form.

The errors committed due to the influence of mother tongue tends to be there for a longer time whereas the developmental errors caused by over generalisation (extension of one rule given to specific context to all the other contexts) will tend to get reduced with passage of time due to practice and additional language input.

After looking into the above said problems, it is found that the learners are having problem w.r.to the dimension 'form' (i.e., external appearance and integrated whole of particular aspect), 'structure' (i.e., pattern and sequence of particular aspect), and 'function' (i.e.,use and usage of particular aspect). Apart from the above said problems, they also have some of the difficulties in identifying the contextual meaning such as idiomatic, metaphorical, connotative, etc. In a given test it is found that almost all the learners failed to answer the questions related to 'contextual meaning' and this cause may be due to lack of reading, and understanding. As regarding the dimension 'boundary', it is found that the boundary markers or punctuations such as coma, full stop, exclamatory mark, quotes, etc., are not used properly in the sentences.

Remedial Teaching Measures

Continuous assessment

Testing plays an important role in teaching. It helps the teacher to measure the mastery over the subject by the learners. It is also form a basis for feedback to the teachers. Based on the performance of the learners in a given test the teacher can identify the type and cause of the errors committed. Accordingly the teacher can modify his/her teaching methods and instructional material. During the teaching process, the learning difficulties can be identified but to know the extent of the problem testing plays an important role. When the difficulties are identified then the teaching becomes easy and accordingly the changes can be made in the teaching strategies. Testing is not only the tool to measure the learners' acquisition, but also is a tool to measure the teaching skill of the teacher. Therefore, testing shows the strength and weaknesses of the learners, the teachers and the methods and materials used during the teaching process. Based on this we can have remedial teaching measures / exercises to reinforce the learning process and remove its difficulties.

Improvement in teaching

After locating the area where the difficulty lies, the teacher should devise suitable strategy to overcome the problems in learning. For example if a learner has a problem in structure of the particular syntactic element then the more concentration should be given to teach the structure till the learners have attained it. This can be rectified by giving structure based exercises, self

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correction exercises, pattern practice, etc. Likewise if difficulty in understanding the meaning, the teacher has to teach different types of meaning with examples, and give meaning based exercises, motivating the learners to read newspapers, magazines, and books, fiction of that language and ask them to refer to lexicons, dictionaries to understand the meaning of the difficult phrases, clauses, sentences and so on. Practice is the most important remedial measure in any learning process. Thus say practice makes a person perfect. All kinds of drills and exercises come under practice only.

Applying different methods of teaching

The teacher while teaching should use the different methods of teaching. The teacher can also make use of the language lab for practicing. Some of the methods of language teaching are : the grammar translation method, the direct method, audio-lingual method, eclectic method, etc., and grammar teaching methods such as inductive method, deductive method, etc.

Motivating the learners

Some of the activities can be undertaken informally outside the classroom. For this the teacher has to motivate the learners in the following ways : Ask the learners to speak the target language which they formally learn in the classroom, making them listening news bulletin on radio / television, create an atmosphere to watch the movies of target language, create an avenue to talking with the ordinary people of that language group, encourage them to make a friend from the native speakers of target language, etc (Neethivanan, J., 1999)[6].

Using Teaching Aids

In this modern era, the use of technology plays an important role in teaching. Teaching through multimedia, creating computer based exercises, etc., will be very effective.

The above measures may certainly help in overcoming the problem of learning / using syntactical aspects of that particular language (in our case Tamil).

Conclusion

Syntax is the part of grammar. Therefore while teaching Tamil grammar, the emphasis of teaching should be on the functional grammar (application level) rather than the mastering structure (knowledge level) of the traditional grammar. It is better to focus on the meaning and use than on the form. This will pave a way to reduce the learning difficulties.

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