



TITLE

What is grammar?

KEY IDEA

Language is a system.

CONSPECTUS

1. Introduction: Languages have a structure
2. Key idea: Language is a system
3. Reasons:
 - 3.1. You cannot have an infinite number of symbols
 - 3.2. People need to agree on how to communicate
4. Consequences:
 - 4.1. Building blocks make an infinite number of words or signs possible
 - 4.2. Rules allow the combination of building blocks into bigger units
5. Conclusion: Every language needs grammar rules for communication to work well

REFERENCES

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OBJECTIVES

You can **recognize** correct statements about grammar
You can **identify** the most important building blocks of written and signed languages
You can **match** the different parts of grammar with the respective explanations



FULL TEXT

1. Introduction: Languages have a structure

When you speak or sign, you usually do not think much about how you do it. But you cannot produce words, signs and sentences any way you want. You may not be aware of it, but you always follow different rules when you speak or sign. The rules you need to combine words or signs into sentences are called grammar rules. Without them, it would be very difficult to communicate with each other. Why is that so?

2. Key idea: Language needs a system

When you look at sentences or texts, you will notice that they are made up of words or signs. When you analyse a word or a sign, you will find that they are made up of even smaller parts: for a certain spoken word, for example "language", you have to put sounds in the correct order. For the sign LANGUAGE, you have to use a certain handshape with a certain hand orientation, location and movement. Words and signs belong to the "building blocks" of languages. They are made up of even smaller building blocks.

For sentences or whole texts, you have to combine words or signs. You need grammar rules: the grammar rules explain how to combine the building blocks correctly. Different languages may use different grammar rules. [Insert examples in your national language here.] If you want other people to understand what you tell them, you need to follow the grammar rules of the language you are using.

3. Reasons:

3.1. You cannot have an infinite number of symbols without structure

When you tell somebody about a book, you do not have to carry a real book with you all the time to show it during the conversation. Instead, you can just use the word "book" or the sign BOOK as a substitute for the real book. We call such substitutes "symbols". The word "book" or the sign BOOK are symbols for the real book. Language uses words and signs as symbols for things, but also for ideas and actions in everyday life.

Humans can produce these symbols with their speech organs or their hands and bodies.



You can produce an infinite number of symbols. That means you can produce an infinite number of signs and words. But if you have an infinite number of symbols without a structure, your brain has trouble remembering every single one of these symbols.

3.2. People need to agree on how to communicate

If you want other people to understand what you tell them, you need to agree on something. If each of the communication partners uses their own symbols, the other communication partners will not understand them. You have to use the same symbols and the same rules for using the symbols.

Think of deaf children that grow up alone among hearing people. They will often develop their own gestures to communicate with others. We call these gestures "home sign". This is not a full language: while the children can use them to communicate with their family, "home sign" will not be understood by outsiders.

4. Consequences:

4.1. Building blocks make an infinite number of words or signs possible

Languages have found a solution: languages do not use single symbols. Instead, all languages use small building blocks. Every language uses a finite number of these building blocks. Some of the building blocks are the same in many languages; some exist only in few languages. Every language has their own building blocks.

There are building blocks of different size. The smallest building blocks form bigger building blocks. For example, sounds form spoken words. In written language, letters form written words. Moving hands or hands in a certain place on your body form signs. Words and signs are bigger building blocks. With them, you can build parts of sentences and full sentences. When you combine sentences, you can build texts.

4.2. Rules allow the combination of building block into bigger units

Languages use building blocks to build first signs and words and then parts of sentences and full sentences. When you want to communicate with another person, you need to agree on some system of how to combine these building blocks. Spoken languages



combine most of their building blocks one after the other. Sign languages can often combine several building blocks at the same time. For example, you want to tell someone about a car going up the mountain. In a spoken language, you have to arrange the words one after another in a certain order:

The car drives up the mountain.

[Please substitute an example in your national spoken language.]

In a sign language, you have a handshape for the car and you can show the car's movement, its speed and the shape of the road at the same time.

[Please insert video/picture of respective signing in your national sign language.]

The rules that people need to build signs, words, phrases and sentences are the grammar of a language. Some scientists research the rules of language as a general topic. Other scientists analyse the rules of a single language. Depending on which rules you analyse, the term "grammar" has different meanings:

1. "Grammar in linguistics"

"Grammar" can mean a part of linguistics: the **study of the rules of a language** and how languages are constructed. A grammar is made up of different parts:

The first part deals with the smallest building blocks. We call this part of grammar **Phonology**. In a sign language, building blocks can be produced with the hands: for example, different handshapes. Other building blocks are produced without the hands: for example, when you move your mouth or your eyebrows. The smallest building blocks of spoken languages are sounds. Sounds are a bit similar to letters in a written word, but hearing people can hear them instead of reading them.

The second part is about using these smallest building blocks to build signs or words. We call this part of grammar **Morphology**.

The third part is about using signs or words to build parts of sentences and full sentences.



We call this part of grammar **Syntax**.

2. "Grammar" as the set of rules of a single language

"Grammar" can also mean a **grammar book**. A grammar book shows learners how to build words, signs, parts of sentences or full sentences from the building blocks of a certain language: for example, a German grammar.

People often use constructions that a grammar book marks as "wrong". There can be a big gap between the rules in the grammar book and what people say or sign in everyday life. Also, the rules of grammar can change over the course of time. A language and its grammar are not something that is fixed forever; there are always changes.

Not all the rules of a language may apply to all its speakers or signers. Every language has variants, for example based on region and age.

5. Conclusion: Every language needs grammar rules for a smooth communication. Grammar is not the same for all the languages. Every language has its own grammar. How do you learn the grammar of a language? When you grow up with a language, you learn its grammar mostly when you watch other people signing or listen to other people talking. You can learn a new language simply by talking or signing with people who use it. But if you want to write correct texts, it is important to study the grammar rules of this language.

Sign language grammar differs from the grammar of spoken languages. The main reason for these differences is that sign languages can use the three-dimensional space. Sign languages can use this space to describe forms or to show where things are in space. You can use space to show what happens between two people: for example, someone gives a flower to another person. In sign language, the movement of the hand shows who gives the flower to whom. In a spoken or written language, usually the word order and special forms of the words show who gives the flower to whom.