

## Lecture4 : Well-formedness vs appropriateness

### Grammaticality and Acceptability

In linguistics (particularly in generative grammar), the term *grammaticality* refers to the conformity of a sentence to the rules defined by a specific grammar of a language. Grammaticality should not be confused with notions of correctness or acceptability as determined by prescriptive grammarians.

Frederick J. Newmeyer said: "a sentence is 'grammatical' if it is generated by the grammar, 'ungrammatical' if it is not". Designating a sentence as 'ungrammatical' simply means that native speakers tend to avoid the sentence, cringe when they hear it, and judge it as sounding odd." "Note too that when a sentence is deemed ungrammatical, it might still be used in certain circumstances.

"The concept of **grammaticality** is intrinsically linked to Noam Chomsky and was intended to account for possible violations of the basic phrase structure." (Anita Fetzer, , 2004) - "*Acceptability* is the extent to which a sentence allowed by the rules to be grammatical is considered permissible by speakers and hearer; **grammaticality** is the extent to which a 'string' of language conforms with a set of given rules."

Nilsenova (2009) stated that : "Acceptability . . . is related to speaker's performance, that is the actual use of her language in concrete situations. As stressed by Chomsky, acceptability should not be confused with grammaticality: while an acceptable sentence must be grammatical, not just any grammatical sentence is necessarily acceptable. For a sentence to be judged acceptable, it must also appear natural and appropriate in a given context, be easily understood and, possibly, be to a certain extent conventionalized."

**Grammaticality** and **Good Style**  
Hurford (2012) contended that : "For human language, the distinction between **grammaticality** and good style is, for most linguists and for most cases, clear. But there are definitely borderline cases where it's not clear whether a problem with a sentence is grammatical or stylistic. Here is a notorious example, involving self-centre-embedding, a contentious issue since the beginnings of generative grammar. *Where is the book that the students the professor I met taught studied?* The orthodox view in generative linguistics is that such examples are perfectly grammatical English, but stylistically poor, because they are hard to parse."

**Grammaticality** in **Context**  
Lakoff (1971) emphasized that : "[T]here are a great many cases where it makes no sense to speak of the well-formedness or '**grammaticality**' of a sentence in isolation. Instead one must speak of a relative well-formedness and/or relative grammaticality; that is, in such cases a sentence will be well-formed only with respect to certain presuppositions about the nature of the world."

### Appropriateness

In linguistics and communication studies, *appropriateness* is the extent to which an utterance is perceived as suitable for a particular purpose and a particular audience in a particular social context.

"In the mid to late 1960s, awareness was increasing among applied linguists of the problem of over-emphasis on structural competence and insufficient attention paid to other dimensions of communicative competence, particularly **appropriateness**. [Leonard] Newmark (1966) is a clear example of this awareness, and his paper speaks of the student who may be entirely 'structurally competent,' yet who is unable to perform even the simplest communicative task.

Appropriateness of a speech act is measured against sociocultural norms. The norms may vary somewhat within a given group of society, but they are generally recognized within the society as a whole. However, the same speech act in one society's culture may not be considered appropriate in another's. What are the possible repercussions of a learner saying things that would be viewed as inappropriate in another culture and society? If repeated many times, the learner would probably be viewed negatively by the native speakers in that culture and society. For this reason, the learner should be made aware of possible cross-linguistic problems.

## **Ressources**

<https://coerll.utexas.edu/methods/modules/pragmatics/02/appropriateness.php>

<https://www.thoughtco.com/>

George Lakoff, "Presupposition and Relative Well-Formedness." *Semantics: An Interdisciplinary Reader in Philosophy, Linguistics and Psychology*, ed. by Danny D. Steinberg and Leon A. Jakobovits. Cambridge University Press, 1971.