

Practice Unit 13

1. To develop a feeling for language-specific structural constraints, try to work out a definition for the category "adjective" in English and German. Practically all available grammars agree that there are adjectives in English and German and that one of their major uses is to modify nouns in attributive position, typically in frames of the following kind:

a very _____ [noun]
ein(e) sehr _____ [Substantiv]

There is a core of adjectives which fit the frame both in English and German, for example items denoting qualities such as size, weight or colour. Beyond that, each language sets the limits differently on what it allows into this adjectival frame. For example, *a very South London voice* is possible in English, whereas *eine sehr Südlondon(er) Aussprache* is not. Find more contrasts of this kind.

2. One of the most productive word-formation processes in present-day English, namely part-of-speech class change without external marking (e.g. *bottle – to bottle*), was introduced as "conversion" in Unit 3 of the present book. Other sources treat similar phenomena under the heading of "zero-derivation," "syntactic homonymy," or similar terms. Consult a few handbooks and give a comparative critique of the terminology they use and the phenomena they include in their treatment. Does the choice of terminology have an impact on the phenomena studied?
3. As the famous linguist Edward Sapir once remarked, "all grammars leak." For the linguist the problem is to decide whether an apparent exception to a rule can be interpreted as:

- (1) a marginal instance in a fuzzy category
- (2) rule-breaking which is licensed by the special circumstances of an individual utterance
- (3) proper counter-evidence, which should lead to a modification or dismissal of a bad rule

Taking the widely accepted rule that "English has strict SVO order" as a starting point, comment on the status of the following apparent exceptions.

** I speak well English.*

I speak well all those languages that I learned the natural way, and badly all those that I was exposed to only in school.

This type of remark I really hate.

[cf. ** This type of remark really hate I.*]

On the wall hung a faded photograph of the previous owner of the place.

4. Which of the following claims by British contextualist M.A.K. Halliday are not compatible with the structuralist research agenda outlined by de Saussure, and why?

"We study language partly in order to understand language and how it works, and partly to understand what people do with it. The two questions are closely connected: the way language is organised has been determined, over the million and more years of its evolution, by the functions it is called on to serve. Like any other tool, it is shaped by its purposes." (M.A.K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, *Language, context and text: A social semiotic perspective*. Deakin University Press 1985, repr. Oxford: OUP, 1989, p. 44)

"Language, unlike mathematics, is not clearcut or precise. It is a natural human creation, and, like many other natural human creations, it is inherently messy." (M.A.K. Halliday, *Language as social semiotics: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Arnold, 1978, p. 203)

For a start, you may find it helpful to consider how the Saussurean distinctions between *langue* and *parole*, or between the synchronic and diachronic approach to the study of language, can be squared with the claims made in the first quotation.