

# Characterizing Grammaticality: A Draft Framework

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This working draft presents a model for characterizing grammaticality in terms of form-meaning pairings and their evolution within language communities. The model attempts to account for both categorical constraints and gradient acceptability while incorporating processing effects and sociolinguistic factors. I share it here in outline form to solicit feedback from the linguistics and philosophy communities, particularly regarding:

- The model's theoretical adequacy and explanatory power
- Its treatment of the interface between syntax and other linguistic systems
- The characterization of systematic syntactic blocks
- The relationship between processing constraints and grammaticality judgments

Comments and critiques would be appreciated and graciously received.

# 1 The Framework

1. At its most basic, a grammatical construction is one with an accepted form-meaning pairing within a specific language community, dialect, register, or situation.
2. Grammaticality judgments always involve syntax or morphology, but they may interact with meaning in other systems, such as lexis or phonology. For example:
  - \**Each **contract** is different* (where verbal stress pattern conflicts with the syntactic function).
3. The meaning element has a semantic component and often includes a socio-pragmatic aspect. For example:
  - *Try it and you'll regret it.* conveys a threat beyond its semantic meaning.
4. Grammaticality is not required for meaning. Many ungrammatical constructions convey their intended meaning perfectly. For example:
  - \**It very good.*
5. Motivations for accommodating, deprecating, or reanalyzing ungrammatical constructions as grammatical include:
  - (a) Semantic motivations, such as misinterpretation or metaphorical usage for novel meanings.
    - The *going to* futurate (*She's going to study law*) arose from reanalysis of motion constructions.
  - (b) Social motivations reflecting identity or status.
    - The simple past tense (*il alla*) in Standard spoken French has largely been replaced by compound forms (*il est allé*).
  - (c) Structural motivations due to:
    - i. Processing constraints (length, embedding, dependency distances).
    - ii. Lack of clarity (Jespersen's cycle, loss of inflectional endings).
    - iii. Structural analogy (e.g., *?I asked about what did she do.*)
  - (d) Iconic motivations, where form directly reflects meaning. For instance:
    - *a big big problem* (Reduplications that convey intensity)
6. Grammaticality within a language community reflects what distinctions the community considers relevant to encode. For instance:
  - The progressive aspect is mandatory in certain English contexts (*She is studying right now*) but not in French (*Elle étudie maintenant*).

7. A construction is considered ungrammatical when:
- (a) The form fails to pair with any meaning. For example:
    - *\*Can the have running?*
  - (b) The intended form-meaning pairing clashes because:
    - i. There is a divergence between intended and expected meanings. For example:
      - *\*I have 35 years.* (grammatical as a response to *how many years does that add up to?* but intended as ‘I am 35 years old.’)
    - ii. Contradictory form-meaning pairings occur in the same utterance. For example:
      - *\*I have been there yesterday.* (the past-time lexical semantics clashes with the non-past-time tense semantics)
  - (c) An established alternate form is strongly preferred without compelling justification for the deviation. For example:
    - *\*We sheared three sheeps* (no motivation for deviation) vs. *the black sheeps of the family* (motivated by metaphorical extension)
  - (d) It is exceedingly rare:
    - *?I saw Joan, a friend of whose was visiting.* (Examples of independent relative *whose* may be less than 1 in a billion, and people vary in their judgments of the example.)
8. A grammatical construction can be wrongly judged ungrammatical when:
- (a) The structure is misperceived. For example:
    - *The old man the boats.* (intended as *The elderly operate the boats.*)
  - (b) Processing capabilities are exceeded by structural demands. For example:
    - *The bread the baker the apprentice helped made is delicious.*
9. An ungrammatical construction can be wrongly judged grammatical when processing capabilities are exceeded by semantic demands. For example:
- *\*In Michigan and Minnesota, more people found Mr. Bush’s ads negative than they did Mr. Kerry’s.*

10. Many languages appear to systematically block certain syntactic structures for reasons we can't yet explain, independent of their semantic transparency or ease of interpretation. These can be diagnosed by their:
  - (a) Persistent unacceptability, regardless of exposure or context
  - (b) Categorical rather than gradient ungrammaticality
  - (c) Independence from both processing demands and semantic transparency. For example:
    - \**Which did you buy* [ \_\_ *car*]? (Left Branch extraction)
    - Though transparently meaning 'which car did you buy', the structure itself remains impossible
11. The severity of grammaticality judgments depends on the nature and extent of form-meaning mismatches.