IML Spectrum Seminars

**Modeling Syntax:**

**Facets of the Transformational Grammar**

*T*he ‘humanistic approach’ to ‘language’ defines language as a means of social communication. Language as a means of communication can be analyzed from the scientific perspective which is, in a sense, also within the domains of linguistics. Many of the scientific approaches used nowadays can also be applied to the study of language. **Today, linguists can *mathematize* their analyses by applying modified scientific methods and techniques to sentence structures to discover how the human mind processes *thoughts* and *thought patterns* to turn them into well-formed *sentences* and *sentence patterns*.**

Language scientists observe syntax patterns in naturally occurring samples of use of language, use the data to generate the hypotheses that are tested against more syntactic data and, if necessary, recast their hypotheses to form and propose theories of language. In the study of syntax, the hypotheses are known as the rules and the group of hypotheses that describe a language in syntax is sometimes referred to as grammar. This issue was put forward in the speech of Mrs. Mosume Akhter Flora, Sr. Lecturer of the Department of English at North South University in an event of the *IML Spectrum Seminars.* The technical issues relating to morpho-syntax of language were carefully simplified so that the participants, who represented different academic disciplines including the BBA can easily understand.

The *Institute of Modern Languages* presented the seminar **Modeling Syntax: Facets of the Transformational Grammar** on September 4, 2013. It was an event of the *IML Spectrum Seminars* - an important series of academic seminars that makes a platform for undergraduate and graduate English students to present their original and innovative research work to enrich the scholarly body of literary and linguistic criticism under the supervision of the prominent faculty members of the English Department.

Mr. M Shahedul Haque, Chairman, Department of English and the Head of the Institute of Modern Languages initiated this event of the recently introduced *IML Spectrum Seminars* series. He said that morpho-syntax is at the heart of the research into language as acquisition of language traditionally meant acquisition of the rules of morpho-syntax of a language. He said although generativistic ideas in linguistics primarily apply to first language contexts, its implications are powerful enough to enrich our understanding about the process of the acquisition of additional and auxiliary languages. The IML director also encouraged the students to develop interest in syntax from the transformational and generativistic frames of reference in linguistics to benefit teachers and students of ELT.

***Contrast between Transformational Grammar and Traditional Grammar***

Afterwards, Ms. Mosume Akhter Flora, the leader of this enthralling seminar, took the floor. She not only enriched the students with the scientific perspective of the language but also enlightened them with the view of generative grammar or transformational grammar of syntax by showing how it is different from the usual descriptive grammar. She explicated that the transformational grammar is a dominant theory of syntax, a major contribution by Noam Chomsky. This theory started in 1950s and has developed over the years appearing in different names under different terminologies. Therefore, this theory is also known as transformational generative grammar (TG), standard theory, extended standard theory, government and binding theory, minimalism etc. The underlying thesis of generative grammar is that sentences are generated by a subconscious set of procedures just like the computer programs. These procedures are parts of our cognitive abilities. Nevertheless, these rules are nothing like the grammatical rules that we have learned at schools rather these instruct how the order of the sentence should be.

After this motivating introductory speech, Ms. Flora introduced three speakers, Mehedi Hasan, Nahin Chowdhury and Sadia Zahid, the students of the English Department. These new fledgling linguists further elucidated this mystery of syntax and transformational grammar. Mr. Mehedi Hasan reemphasized on the issues of transformational generative grammar and simplified the difference between traditional descriptive grammar and generative grammar. He explained that TG incorporates transformation and generation, which indicates that this grammar assists generating new sentences through transformation. He also illustrated some basic, but important terms in syntax using interesting diagrams which captivated the audience. Furthermore, he highlighted how to represent different sentence structures of various languages like English, Garo etc. using TG and thus illustrated the universal nature of generative grammar.

***The Core Concern of the Transformational Grammar***

Afterwards, Ms. Nahin Chowdhury took the floor to edify the audience with X-bar theory, the core concern of TG. This theory is basically a three-layer theory incorporating lexical (X), X-bar (X’) and phrasal (XP) categories that portrays the hierarchical nature of sentences using tree diagrams. This X represents any lexical categories like noun (N), verb (V), adjective (Adj), preposition (P) etc. It may apparently sound bewildering but anyone can be spellbound by knowing that any sentence can be visually represented using tree diagrams and furthermore, a simple sentence can have so many technicalities. This interesting tree diagram has been used by all the presenters and one of the simple examples has been shown in this article. This X-bar theory is very important as it is a universal feature for every language that can show the tense marker, fit in the auxiliaries, complementizers, specifiers and other additional categories and accommodate the complex sentences with embedded clauses.

***Movements in the Transformational Grammar***

At last Ms. Sadia Zahid enthralled the students by showing movements in transformational grammar, especially the verb movement. She explicated how transformation overcomes some constraints of X-bar theory and produces questions and VSO structured sentences which were otherwise impossible to generate using the X-bar theory. She used the examples from English, French and Irish languages to illuminate the movement or transformation, a fascinating feature of TG.

Thus, this intriguing seminar ended with the hope that more students get interested in exploring the vast field of linguistics, especially syntax which apparently seems intimidating, but once someone endeavors to explore this fascinating field, s/he can never stop diving for the pearls of wisdom that this seminar has brought about.

*Written by the RIT*

**IML Spectrum Seminars**

The Institute of Modern Languages (IML) organizes weekend seminars in which researchers and experts discuss language and communication issues with students and faculty members to motivate further exploration of the issues taught in the mainstream programs (BA and MA) in the English Department.

The *Spectrum Seminars* may be attended by students/teachers of English of other universities too.