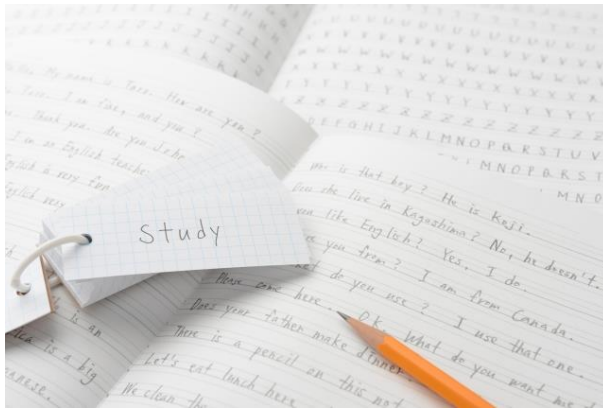


## A Must Must Be Wrong.

When I was a junior high to high school student, the teachers in charge of my English classes would often say, “You must study English grammar because you can’t separate its meaning from the grammar.” At first I believed them, partly because I might be a bit naïve student in those days. But the more I studied English grammar, the more suspicious it seemed to be. Yes, any grammar book gave some explanations between the two components — grammar and meaning. Some of them seemed convincing but the others didn’t. Another question I had was, “Why don’t the teachers of the Japanese language make the same point? Simply because it is the mother tongue?” Fortunately or unfortunately, I stopped pursuing the problem any further at this stage, because I had to study other subjects as well. (The subject, World History, for example, seemed much more interesting in those days.)



A bit long after that, I began studying German Grammar. Strangely, it seemed that no teachers emphasize on the inseparable relation between the two components. I sensed that it’s no wonder; grammar and meaning are definitely separable. German has a lot of seemingly meaningless declensions. In actual communications with native speakers, I experienced that I could skip many of them. This is not end of the story. A teacher of the Arabic language even said, “In this class, we will focus on its proper grammar. It is complicated and might be difficult. If your concern is only to develop the conversation skill, another way might be better.” Later at graduate school, I learned that my intuition was completely right. One of the problem behind this common sense (I would say) lies in the terminology, “grammar”. The word grammar is ambiguous in many ways. In modern linguistics grammar means all the rules including sound systems. Instead, my teachers should have used the word “form,” which still has a problem, though.

Thanks to the development of the brain science and linguistics, putting technical details aside (because I have to introduce a lot of technical terms and graphics), human beings process meanings faster than forms by about 200 milliseconds. When someone say



in front of an automatic ticket checker, “I have read The Merchant of Venice three times”, almost everybody must feel that this is an uninterpretable utterance. We can observe our brain respond to the meaning around 400 milliseconds after we have got a stimulus. On the other hand when we are given a sentence such as “The spy saw the cop with binoculars.” Because of the ambiguous grammatical scope of the word “with,” normally we try to parse the sentence several times. In such a case our brain respond to the grammar around 600 milliseconds after we have got a stimulus. In a sense we process form after we check its meanings.

I wouldn't say such knowledge is essential to all learners of English. What I would like to say is that it needs a bit of courage to challenge the authorities, but it is not rare that they are wrong in any field.

