Cognitive linguistics in the English classroom: new possibilities for thinking about teaching grammar

1. Grammar and language in the classroom

There has never been a better time to think about the practice of teaching grammar. The arrival of Key Stage 2 SPaG tests has heralded a debate about the value of testing young people on their ability to identify formal parts of speech, and has, predictably, resulted in a new wave of teaching resources and materials from educational publishers. On the other hand, recent research (Myhill et al. 2012) has for the first time shown that it is possible to draw some connection between contextualised, embedded grammar teaching and a sustained improvement in children’s writing. This kind of teaching emphasises a movement away from a ‘deficit model’ of grammar teaching towards an enabling, facilitating and motivating pedagogy of language awareness that functions beyond the mere servicing of particular political ideologies. Yet in many ways, one of the biggest surprises is that the relationship between a precise and fully understood linguistic knowledge, and better reading and writing outcomes has taken so long to be confirmed. Pedagogies such as rhetorical grammar (Kolln and Gray 2010) have long valued such an approach, and in higher education, stylistics (see for example Simpson 2004) is a thriving discipline that draws on linguistic theory in the service of critical response and interpretation. The reconfiguration of grammar into a set of language resources from which students can make informed and deliberate choices based on aspects of genre, purpose, readership and aesthetics offers the potential for a powerful new discourse of language teaching in schools. It also provides an opportunity to debate the pedagogic value of different models of grammar.

2. Models of grammar teaching

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, grammar teaching in schools either followed Latinate models that prescribed correct notions of language use, or when these were discredited as having little pedagogical value, ceased to be taught at all. Its return to classrooms came in the form of a traditional ‘naming of parts’ type approach based on more formal and generative models of grammar that emphasised the uniqueness of language as an autonomous system that is acquired separately from other types of learning, looked inwards at rules and structures rather than outwards at instances of speech and writing, and often divorced the study of language from the contexts in which it was used. The Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) project (see Carter 1990) sought to promote a more functional way of looking at language, and advocated a movement away from decontextualised teaching of form and rules in the practice of naming and gap-filling exercises. Instead an emphasis was given to exploratory methods of teaching and the understanding of language as a primarily a social tool that is constantly changing according to context and period, and that reveals much both about the values of individuals and hierarchical relationships within society (Carter 1990). However, when the project ceased to be supported by
the UK government and was abolished, there was a return to a traditional grammar teaching, epitomised by the national strategies approach from 2001 onwards.

3. Cognitive linguistics as a way of thinking about language

Cognitive linguistics offers an alternative way of thinking about language, as part of a unified system of cognitive processes that reflect our status as physical beings engaged in social interactions. In this model, the principle of embodied cognition proposes that how we conceptualise and explain those conceptualisations through language is influenced by our physical existence in the world. So for example, our general properties of being upright and moving on two legs are reflected in linguistic expressions such as the prepositions ‘up’ and ‘down’, which denote vertical relationships and trajectories, and are even extended into orientational metaphors, such as those which see well-being as being upright, and poor health as moving or facing downwards (think of the sayings ‘I was on a high’ and ‘I was on top of my game’, and ‘I’m feeling low’ or ‘he was under the weather’). In these instances physical types of experience are used to understand and explain other more abstract areas. Another straightforward example of how language is embodied is in the way that it mirrors our visual system, where we organise what we see as a relationship where one entity has prominence (usually in terms of some kind of perceptual saliency) over a background. If we think of a scene in which there is a book on a table, the book stands out against the background of the table on which it rests. The same organising principle is likely to be expressed grammatically as ‘The book is on the table’, reflecting the book’s status as the ‘stand out’ object, and given prominence at the front of the clause. Compare this to ‘The table is under the book’, which would be, in the vast majority of cases, a very unnatural way of presenting the same scene.

As well as aiming to explain embodied motivations for linguistic expressions, cognitive linguistics is above all concerned with language in use, viewing language as a social phenomenon rather than simply a series of rules and structures. It seems to me that these principles translate well into a method of teaching aspects of grammar. As I detail below, this involves using the grammar as a way of thinking about language, not simply as a descriptive tool. In the following example, I outline an approach that uses such embodied learning in the form of drawing, gesture and physical movement as a way of explaining the abstract grammatical concept of modality.

4. Modality

In my experience, modality is one of the most difficult concepts to teach, yet an understanding of the forms and motivations of modal constructions is empowering for students both in exploring the choices text producers make in given language situations, and subsequently when thinking about making decisions in their own writing.
Traditionally, modal forms might be considered as instances of either root modality (concerned with obligation and permission) or epistemic modality (concerned with possibility), usually confined to modal auxiliary verbs such as ‘must’, ‘may’ or ‘could’. A more conceptualised view might extend to understanding modality as either the expression or stance of an individual towards a state of affairs, and/or the drawing of attention towards the factual status of an event. So a modal expression such as ‘I must go to the party’ expresses both an attitude (the speaker’s obligation to attend the party) and the fact that this has not yet happened, in comparison to the non-modal or categorical expression ‘I went to the party’. Although this example uses a modal auxiliary verb, modality can also be expressed using other linguistic forms such as modal adjectives (e.g. possible), modal adverbs (e.g. perhaps), non-auxiliary (i.e. lexical) verbs (e.g. like), and modal tags (e.g. I guess).

In keeping with its emphasis on the embodied nature of thinking and conceptualising, a cognitive linguistic approach views modality as a series of patterns centred on the notions of force and basic movement in the physical world. In these terms, the meaning of a modal auxiliary verb such as ‘must’ derives from the very physical sense of a force pushing someone towards carrying out a certain act. The physical domain is then used to understand a similar kind of mental force or pressure exerted in the statement ‘I must go to the party’. In a similar way, the meaning of ‘may’ can be understood as a restriction being lifted from someone or something by a more powerful entity, whilst ‘can’ represents a source of potential energy that is available for someone to use. Mark Johnson (1987) has argued that modal forms can be understood in these physical terms as instances where people or objects interact with others, blocking or allowing movement, and permitting or constraining energy potential. These basic patterns are examples of image schemas, basic templates for making meaning that arise naturally from the various sensory interactions humans have in their physical environments. As Mandler (2004) explains, image schemas play an important role in the development of thought and speech in young children in that they provide inherently meaningful structures into which new knowledge can be assimilated. A basic force schema of one entity pushing another arises naturally in very young children through their interaction in the physical world, for example when something is pushed over. This interaction provides a structure for extending into mental operations: the idea of force as a means of getting something that you want. In their linguistic realisations, image schemas such as those in Figure 1 that are based on types of interactive force provide a template for conceptualising different modal forms.

**Compulsion:** one entity exerts force on another causing movement
Restriction: one powerful entity prevents the movement or actions of a less powerful entity

Lifting of restriction: a restriction is lifted by the more powerful entity that allows someone to now do something

Figure 1: Examples of image schemas (adapted from Johnson 1987)

5. From theory to practice

In the following example I show how one teacher exploited the embodied and image-schematic nature of modality in an A level English Language lesson on the topic of ‘language and power’. In this lesson, the focus was on how types of power were both inherent and explicitly foregrounded in a series of utterances containing modal constructions. The class had already explored some appropriate theories about institutional power, power and identity, occupational registers and discourses, and were now beginning to look at short texts as a way of exploring how linguistic choices reflect the asymmetrical power relationship between speakers. They had not yet looked at the concept of modality.

The lesson began with the students looking at a series of utterances all containing modal auxiliary verbs together with a context in which each might occur or be spoken. Three of these are shown in Figure 2. The students undertook two distinct types of embodied learning activity to explore modality. Firstly, they were asked in pairs to provide a sketch of what they considered to be the meaning of each.
Figure 2: Modal utterances

The rationale for this was to get them thinking in non-linguistic imagistic terms so as to explore the kinds of force in modal constructions in a way that simply reading the utterances or saying them aloud with variations in tone could hope to achieve. Typically, students came up with sketches like those in Figure 3.

Using this as a starting point, the students were able to explore how the modal auxiliary verbs ‘must’, ‘can’ and ‘may’ in the utterances represent different kinds of force being transmitted between participants. In the two sketches shown, this force results in either blocking an action (utterance 1) or providing the means for one to take place (utterance 3). These were then directly linked to the contexts of the utterances, taking into account the degrees of inherent power attached to participants in each. Students were able to use their previous learning on this topic in conjunction with their sketches to understand that the modal auxiliary verbs in these instances could be understood in these image-schematic terms. At this stage, the class began to explore the different kinds of patterns that provide templates for the meanings of other modal auxiliary verbs: should, ought, could, might, will and shall.
With underlying sense of patterns in place, the students then engaged in a further activity to convey what they thought were the meanings of the modal constructions and the utterances using only physical movement, gesture, and the classroom space. In this exercise, students developed their initial ideas on image-schematic patterns to explore the embodied nature of meaning and the extension of a force schema based on physical movement into the more abstract domains. In this activity, the context of each of the utterances was ‘played out’ through the ways in which the students interacted with each other and used the physical space of the classroom as a way of both demonstrating physical and psychological force and explaining meaning. Examples of one group’s responses to each of the utterances are shown in Figures 4, 5 and 6.

Figures 4, 5 and 6: representing modal force using the body and classroom space
In figure 4, the student’s interpretation of the modal auxiliary verb ‘must’ in utterance 1 rests on her understanding of how the social and institutional power exerted by the teacher and school operates. In this example, the student uses pushing the classroom door as a way of showing how the restrictions imposed by the school are an extension of a type of force schema from the physical domain (a powerful entity blocking and preventing the ability of a less powerful one from doing something). In figure 5, a similar kind of power is understood in the ability of the company employee to impose a restriction. In this example, the students’ interpretation incorporates a hand gesture that represents mental as well as physical blocking. And in figure 6, the student’s opening of her arm shows how the meaning of the modal auxiliary verb is this time underpinned by a sense of a restriction being lifted. In all of these examples, the students were able to articulate meaning through exploring the embodied nature of modal constructions. Since these exercises promote the view that grammatical structures are meaningful in their own right, they were able to understand language both as a repertoire of potential choices and as a principled and systematically organised way of representing experience arising out of and motivated by real situations of use.

The principles discussed above could be used in other activities where modality is the focus. These might include:

• identifying degrees of modal strength along a continuum based on the kinds of force they typically show. This could involve exploring the use of modal verbs in **charity advertisements**, where there is a need to strike a balance between urgency (strong modal force) and avoiding being too imposing (use of softer modal forms). This is a good way of exploring more epistemic forms based on certainty or possibility where the force applied and understood is clearly more psychological than physical.

• exploring the idea of politeness in **transcripts of speech** by looking at why speakers might want to use more forceful or less forceful constructions as they interact. Asking students to articulate and reflect on choices through gesture and movement offers a good way of exploring the causes and effects of speakers’ linguistic decisions;

• ‘rewriting’ or ‘re-acting’ **persuasive texts**, replacing them with either stronger/weaker modals or non-modal expressions, and thinking about why these were not chosen by writers or speakers in those particular instances of production;

• exploring how modality works with other dominant features such as imperative sentences and repetition. Students looking at **political speeches** could consider how these language features combine to create particular effects based on aspects of obligation or certainty.

The ideas suggested follow important principles of contextualised and embedded language teaching, detailed below and based on Carter (1990: 4-5).

1. It is situated in a real text and explores language in use rather than being geared towards merely feature-spotting, the naming of parts, and gap-filling exercises.
2. It builds on what students already know about language.
3. It gives them exposure in exploring language before analysing its use and effects in more conscious detail.
4. It leads naturally onto a functional and critical kind of discourse analysis, looking at the motivation and ideology behind language choices.
5. It introduces metalanguage in context and when conceptual learning has taken place.
6. It is experiential, student-centred and motivational.

To this list I might add a seventh

7. It promotes a way of thinking about language that stresses the link between interaction in the physical world and linguistic realisation. It therefore opens up the potential for a whole new way of thinking and learning about language using visual representation, gesture and movement.

6. A future pedagogical grammar?

The theory and the approach that I have described offer students a way of using grammar as a descriptive framework, and a powerful way of thinking about language itself. For teachers, it presents an alternative view of language that is extrinsically linked to the embodied nature of meaning and offers opportunities for this to be exploited through a certain kind of classroom activity. In short, it is grammar put to pedagogic use or what Halliday (2002: 416) calls grammatics, ‘a way of using grammar to think with’. It therefore offers a timely opportunity to address important questions regarding the kind of linguistic awareness that is useful for teachers and their students to explore grammar in context, for as Clark (2010: 190) suggests:

*the question to be addressed is not whether explicit teaching of grammar directly affects pupils’ own command of language or interpretation, but what kind of teaching and what theories underpinning it have the greatest chance of success.*

In studies of second language acquisition (see for example Tyler 2012) there is empirical evidence that the classroom application of cognitive linguistic theories can improve student outcomes in reading and writing. It seems to me that there is a clear motivation for exploring its use in the classroom of native learners, as part of an evolving discussion about what effective grammar teaching could and should involve.

References


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