GRAMMAR

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INTRODUCTION

This article deals with grammar in the narrower sense; that is to say, it refers not to all linguistic systems, but specifically to syntax and morphology. Narrow or not, this is a vast subject, relevant to very many topics which come under the heading of 'Applied Linguistics'. I have shaped what follows partly in order to avoid excessive overlap with other chapters in this volume, and have therefore said relatively little about some matters which are dealt with in detail elsewhere. I begin by discussing briefly what grammar is, why languages need it and how they use it. This is followed by a word on the remarkable proliferation of grammatical models in present-day linguistic theory, and a note on the relationship, such as it is, between these models and applications of linguistics. I then look briefly at Applied Linguistics at its most ambitious: the period when it was believed that investigating the nature of language would inform us about the world; and at later offshoots of this line of thought. A short note on the language-mind-brain relationship is followed by two more extensive sections, on grammar in mother tongue education and foreign language teaching respectively.

WHAT IS GRAMMAR?

Not all meanings can be conveyed by simply stringing words together in an unstructured way. For one thing, unsupported vocabulary cannot specify the direction of causal and other relationships. Putting together the words *man*, *dog* and *bite*, or *floorboards*, *water* and *under*, for instance, leaves important questions unanswered. A second limitation is to do with modality: no string of words on its own can indicate whether it is intended as a statement, a question, an expression of uncertainty, a negation or some other type of communication. And finally, words are mostly labels for classes of things, qualities, processes and so on, whereas we most often talk about particular members of these classes. So in order to construct references to particulars, we need to group words: while the words *my*, *old* and *dog*, for example, taken separately, can each refer to millions of entities, the phrase *my old dog* pins down one specific individual. In more complex communications, grouping may not be transparent, so that we need ways of showing what goes with what.

Languages solve these problems essentially by the devices that we call 'syntax' and 'morphology', supplementing purely lexical information by establishing ordering and movement conventions, changing the forms of words, and using function words (like English *may* or *not*). These devices – grammar – make it possible to distinguish for example *dog bites man* from *man bites dog* or (the Latin equivalents) *canis hominem mordet* from *canem homo mordet*. They permit the expression of modality, distinguishing for instance *floorboards are under water* from *are floorboards under water*, *floorboards may be under water* and *floorboards are not under water*. And they facilitate grouping, showing where necessary which words go together (*small man bites big dog* as against *big man bites small dog*).

Simple in principle, grammar generates considerable complexity in practice. Given a way of grouping words, you can group groups of words, and group groups of groups of words, and so on upwards. Grammatical mechanisms also give rise to, and operate differentially on, distinct word classes. And ordering and movement conventions can be applied in complicated ways to whole assemblies of language. In addition, once grammar is in place it turns out to be useful for many purposes beyond those identified above. The world's languages put time relations, number distinctions, evidentiality, social relationships and any number of other meanings into their

grammars – notions that *can* be handled by vocabulary, but for which grammar seems to be a convenient vehicle. All of this is somewhat analogous to the elaboration that characterizes computer programmes, so simple in their basic mechanism – sequences of 0 and 1 – and so complex and multi-functional in their applications.

The conventional syntax-morphology distinction – like that between grammar and lexis – is not always clear-cut, and varies somewhat in scope from one language to another. Also, languages seem to balance off their use of the different devices to a certain extent, with some relying largely on morphology while others put a heavier load on syntax. There is an old belief that all languages are pretty well equally complex, with simplicity in one area being counterbalanced by complexity in another. There is, however, no good evidence for this, and it may be that some languages just are simpler than others. Certainly there are languages in which morphology, in particular, reaches baroque levels of complication – gender-marking in the West African language Fula (McWhorter 2001: 188–9) is a striking example. However that may be, some aspects of complexity seem to be limited in all languages in the interests of processing efficiency, so as to facilitate production and comprehension (Hawkins 2004).

MODELS OF GRAMMAR: A BEWILDERING VARIETY
Grammarians attempt to establish categories of linguistic elements and operations which can capture accurately and economically the nature of particular languages. They may also wish to go further, setting up theoretical models at a level of abstraction which will accommodate the multifarious structural features of all possible human languages, and thus illuminate the nature of language in general. In addition, some linguists are concerned to show how the structure of language enables children to perform the astonishing feat of learning their mother tongues. Because the grammatical systems of languages are so complex, and differ so greatly, there is room for substantial disagreement about what kind of generalized model can best account for the facts. It is in fact remarkable how much controversy there is about the analysis of a phenomenon, language, for which we have so much data – at least as much as many physical scientists have for the subjects of their investigations. A glance at the index of a linguistics encyclopaedia will direct the reader to a daunting range of different 'grammars': transformational, phrase structure, dependency, word, functional, systemic, construction, cognitive and dozens of others. (For accounts of some of these, see the chapters on generative linguistics, systemic-functional linguistics and cognitive linguistics in this volume.)

These differences partly reflect researchers' choice of focus. Linguistic structures can be investigated primarily in terms of their internal characteristics, or on the basis of the functions they perform. This formal-functional divide can also bring with it important differences of opinion. Formally-oriented grammarians tend to account for shared features of languages – universals – in the belief that these reflect features of the language faculty in the human mind. Proponents of this view may postulate innate knowledge of what defines the range of possible grammars – so-called 'Universal Grammar' (UG) – on the grounds that we allegedly know things about our language for which the input provides inadequate evidence (the 'poverty of the stimulus' argument). A commonly used example concerns 'island constraints'. In an English complex sentence, a word like *who* or *what* can be used in a main clause to

question an element in a dependent clause in some structures, but not others. For example:

> *You said that this nut goes on the wing mirror.*
> *> What did you say that this nut goes on?*
> *John thinks this nut goes on the wing mirror.*
> *> What does John think this nut goes on?*
> *You asked Paul whether this nut goes on the wing mirror.*
> *> *What did you ask Paul whether this nut goes on?*

It is not a straightforward matter to establish a reliable innate rule which will account for the complex range of such constraints, generating correct structures like the first two examples above and disallowing incorrect structures, and which will work for the equivalent constraints in all languages (since UG, if it exists, is necessarily language-independent). Models which assume innate knowledge of grammar therefore tend to operate at a very high and, in the view of some critics, implausible level of abstraction and complexity. The difficulty of the enterprise is strikingly demonstrated by the remarkable changes of course of one prominent approach – Chomskyan generative grammar – over the last half century, with one key idea after another (e.g. transformations, government and binding, principles and parameters) being modified out of recognition or finally abandoned.

Functionally-oriented grammarians, in contrast, regard language universals primarily as reflecting the structural features that languages need to have in order to do what they do. Language acquisition and use, for many grammarians of this persuasion, can be accounted for on the basis of general principles of cognition rather than any wired-in knowledge unique to language. 'Usage-based associative learning' models attribute to the child learner a powerful unconscious capacity to detect regularities in the input, and to abstract patterns at increasing levels of generality (N. Ellis 2003 and this volume). Knowledge of constraints like those illustrated above, in this view, is perhaps explicable simply on the grounds that sentences like the incorrect ones have never occurred in the input, and have therefore never been registered as possible by the child's inbuilt monitor. While most grammatical models have little to say about how the proposed structures and operations might be instantiated in the brain, associative learning or 'connectionist' models incorporate hypotheses, in principle testable, concerning the possible functioning of neural networks.

GRAMMAR AND THE WORLD: MODELS AND APPLICATIONS

For a model of language to support investigation of a real-world problem, two things are necessary. The model must give reliable linguistic information, and it must do so in terms which can be applied effectively to the problem in question, as Crystal (2001: 675) makes clear in relation to a case in clinical linguistics.

> In the field of grammar, it is easy to spot such morphological errors as *mouses* or *tooked*; far less easy to work out what is going on when there are problems with sentence structure. One six-year-old boy was able to say such sentences as *That car is red* and *My car is in the garage*, but could not be persuaded to say *That's a red car* or *My red car*. Asked "Is that a red car or a yellow car?" he would become non-fluent and produce such strings as *A car – a red*, losing control of the clause structure as a whole. The problem turned out to be a difficulty in simultaneously using a developed noun phrase within a clause: as long as the noun phrase consisted solely of a determiner + noun, there was no

problem. But asked to insert an adjective (or any other extra element), and the whole sentence structure broke down. To appreciate the nature of this difficulty requires the analyst not only to make an appropriate syntactic analysis but also to appreciate the implications of a syntactic hierarchy for mental processing. Both syntactic and psycholinguistic perspectives are essential.

It is clear from Crystal's example that, while a reasonably fine-grained analysis is valuable for the clinical linguist, it needs to stay relatively close to the surface of the language. A more abstract analysis – perhaps of greater value to a generative grammarian – might be more difficult to apply and less directly illuminating. (For further discussion in the area of clinical linguistics, see Perkins and Howard, this volume.) This is likely to be the case for many other applications of grammatical models to real-world problems, such as forensic linguistics (Rock, this volume), stylistics (Semino, this volume) or language teaching (see discussion below). Computational linguistics, in contrast, is an area where more complex models may be indispensable. Attempts to create analogues to the human language faculty, for such purposes as machine translation or machine reading, depend crucially on parsing algorithms, which can perhaps only operate successfully on the basis of relatively sophisticated grammatical analyses.

GRAMMAR AS A WINDOW ON THE WORLD
Languages are used to convey messages about the world, so it seems reasonable to suppose that their structure must in one way or another reflect that of the world, at least as this is perceived by human beings. Given that we analyse our experience in terms of situations and events, and that we identify participants in these, it is not surprising that language structure distinguishes ways of referring to situations and events (prototypically verbs), from ways of identifying participants (prototypically nouns). Cognitive grammarians, indeed, (e.g. Langacker 2008) see language structure as reflecting in quite detailed respects, albeit at an abstracted and metaphorical level, our conceptual and perceptual engagement with the physical world.

For classical western philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, the relationship between language and the world was such that linguistic structure could in fact be taken as a key to the organization of reality: the categories into which Aristotle analysed the physical world coincided with the grammatical categories of the Greek language (Allan 2007: 44). Grammar was, so to speak, a window on the world. The structure of language and the structure of logic were also seen as being closely linked, so that a proper understanding of Greek and Latin grammar was taken to provide a basis for sound argument (Allan op. cit.: Ch. 3, 4). These ideas continued through later history. The 'speculative' grammarians of the late middle ages saw grammatical structure as mirroring the structure of God's creation – Latin *speculum* means 'mirror' – (Allan op. cit.: 155–7), while the rationalist philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries saw grammar as reflecting the structure of the human mind, as do present-day generative grammarians. Leibniz believed that a tidied-up language, in which meanings could be expressed without ambiguity, would allow for precise and conclusive logical argument, a view echoed 300 years later by Bertrand Russell (Russell 2004: 540; 1919: 172).

A variant of the belief that language is a window on the world is found in the notion of linguistic relativity. In this view, any language gives us information not about an objective outside world, but about the subjective reality perceived by its speakers – indeed, it shapes that reality through the kinds of meaning encoded in its grammar. Indo-European languages, to take one example, typically use the verbal system to express certain kinds of time relation, whereas native American or Australian languages may not conceptualize time in the grammar at all. On the other hand, the choice of verb forms in some languages (e.g. Bulgarian, Turkish, some native American languages) may indicate evidentiality, showing, for instance, whether a speaker was an eyewitness to what he/she is reporting. The view that differences of this kind may entail different perspectives on external reality goes back to philosophers such as von Humboldt in the early 19th century, and was pursued energetically by American anthropological linguists, notably Sapir and Whorf (see for example Sapir 1921), a hundred years later. For some recent discussions in this field, see Gentner and Goldin-Meadow (2003).

GRAMMAR, THE MIND AND THE BRAIN
Many grammarians claim that the characteristics of language structure must tell us something about the mental organ responsible for it. While there is considerable controversy in this area, it certainly seems highly possible that the organization of language can provide clues to the structure and operation of the mind and brain. A much-debated question concerns modularity: does the human mind have a special module, or modules, for handling language, distinct from the faculties involved in other aspects of cognition? There is evidence that language learning, storage and use are at least partly independent of other cognitive functions. For example, there seems to be a 'critical period' related specifically to language acquisition: after a certain age, most people do not achieve native-like command of all aspects of a new language. And in some recorded cases where young children have been deprived of linguistic input and only starting learning their mother tongue when older, their output has remained defective and ungrammatical. Confirmatory evidence for modularity comes from brain-damaged patients. Strokes or accidents sometimes cause people to lose some or all of their ability to use language, while leaving their other mental faculties apparently unimpaired. Conversely, it is possible for people with severe mental handicap to exhibit normal or even exceptional linguistic competence.

Knowledge of how language works can feed into investigations of the mind and brain, while information can also flow in the other direction, with the results of brain research confirming or extending our understanding of linguistic structure (Perkins and Howard, this volume). Studies of brain-damaged patients have long since demonstrated associations between specific parts of the brain and particular aspects of language behaviour, with lesions in one or other area being found to correlate with problems of comprehension, fluent production, control of syntactic and lexical categories, or handling of meaning. Our knowledge of such associations has been greatly extended and refined by modern functional neuro-imaging techniques, which make it possible to monitor changes in blood flow and electrical activity during language use, and thus to link patterns of excitation in specific areas with different categories of linguistic activity. However, the data that is being collected is complex and difficult to analyse, and while knowledge is growing very rapidly, much more work will be necessary before a clear picture emerges. For the moment, we still

understand little about the physical correlates of our mental and linguistic representations of the world. (For detailed discussion, see Ahlsén, this volume.)

GRAMMAR IN SOCIETY; STANDARDIZATION AND EDUCATION
For most people, perhaps, linguistics and everyday life intersect primarily in the area of education. Most societies have one language that is the principal vehicle of cultural transmission. This may be a high-status classical or foreign language (like Sumerian in ancient Mesopotamia, Latin in the European Middle Ages, Classical Arabic in the Islamic world, or the former colonial languages in some African countries); it may be one of several languages that are spoken in a country (like English in the United States); or it may be the single language of a mainly monolingual culture (like Icelandic or Hungarian). Whatever the situation, the study of that language necessarily features centrally in school curricula. Education and language study can indeed sometimes become almost synonymous. A large part of the mediaeval European educational syllabus, the 'trivium', was made up of grammar (correct language use), dialectic (language for valid argument) and rhetoric (language for effective public communication). Although the link between language, logic and the world later became less generally accepted, classical languages enjoyed continuing prestige in European education up to comparatively recently. Indeed, the study of their grammar is still often seen as having a special if ill-defined value as a training for the mind, and they may continue to feature in some educational curricula out of inertia long after outliving their original purpose, as Latin does in some British schools.

Even where a single local language is spoken and carries the culture of the community, different regional or social groups are likely to speak different varieties, and these differences may cause communication problems. This creates a need for language standardization, which is typically met by the emergence or designation of one variety as the national standard; this variety then becomes the main vehicle of administration, legislation, business, education and publishing. The favoured variety may simply be the dialect spoken by that section of the population which, through historical accident, has come to be socially and politically dominant, as in Britain and many other countries. Or it may be a deliberate creation, codified out of a need to facilitate communication in a country where no single standard has arisen, as happened for instance in Norway after it gained independence from Denmark (Foley 1997: 405). (See also Wee, this volume.)

The prestige and utility of a standard variety generates social and institutional pressure to master its conventions. Non-standard speakers must learn a new dialect in order to achieve literacy and operate effectively in society. Educational systems may use language as a social filter, putting such a premium on linguistic correctness that higher education and many career paths are effectively closed to those who fail to master the prestige variety, whatever their strengths in other areas. Grammar often has a starring role in this connection. Grammatical correctness, after all, has a powerful symbolic value: getting your language right implies that you can obey rules and respect authority. All of this can mean that a substantial part of an educational curriculum may be given up to study of the standard language. Even those who already speak this variety can have to work hard to master the written code: this is in a sense a foreign language for everyone, and may not be at all easy to learn. In French, to take a somewhat bizarre instance, the spelling of the written language preserves a

number of grammatical distinctions which have long since disappeared from speech because of changes in pronunciation; so that French-speaking schoolchildren actually have to develop an explicit knowledge of older French grammar in order to be able to spell correctly. Without this knowledge, they cannot know whether to write, for instance, [aʃte] as *acheter, acheté, achetés, achetée, achetées, achetai, achetais, achetait* or *achetaient* – various forms of the verb for 'to buy' which are pronounced identically by most younger speakers of standard European French.

Unfortunately, elevating one variety of a language to standard status easily entails the devaluation of others, which may be stigmatized as 'incorrect' forms of speech, used by ignorant or uneducated people who have 'not learnt correct grammar', or who 'cannot be troubled to get things right'. This attitude is common in Britain, although all dialects of English have their own history, going back to the distinct forms of speech of the various early mediaeval Germanic and Scandinavian invaders, and although all well-preserved dialects have their own rich and systematic grammars, however much these may diverge from that of their standard counterpart. Interestingly, this is generally easier to accept for 'remote' dialects. Someone from Oxfordshire who says 'I wants them papers what I give you yesterday' may well be criticized for 'failing' to produce standard grammar. In contrast, a Scot who says 'He'll can tell us the morn' ('He'll be able to tell us tomorrow') is more easily seen as speaking an independent variety with its own rule system. In fact, though, the Oxfordshire speaker, just like the Scot, is using forms which are historically rooted and regular and correct in his or her dialect, however much they may upset the standard speaker next door.

Standard languages often acquire a body of prescriptive rules which are devised by individuals in the belief that their languages need regulating, tidying up or protecting against change, and which are frequently codified in 'usage guides'. Where one form is prescribed at the expense of another, the favoured alternative is often the more formal, written variant, or the older form: people in literate societies tend to give more prestige to the written language than to speech, and to regard language change as evidence of falling standards (Aitchison 2001). Many English prescriptive rules were laid down by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century grammarians, often because they believed that English grammar should imitate Latin, a language with higher prestige. Typical examples are the old condemnation of 'split infinitives' like *to boldly go* (a Latin infinitive is a single word, so cannot be split), or the lingering superstition that a preposition is a bad word to end a sentence with (Latin clauses do not end in prepositions, and anyway, it was felt, a *pre*position should logically *pre*cede). Logic is often invoked to condemn sentences like *It's me* or *John and me saw a good film* (both typical of informal standard British English): a nominative (subject) form is said to be 'logically' required in both cases. However, the choice between *I* and *me* depends in complex ways on syntactic environment and level of formality, and is not determined by a simple rule of the kind that works for pronouns in, say, Latin, Russian or German. Grammatical case systems actually vary considerably across languages, and many languages organize themselves in ways that cut right across typical European subject-object categories. To condemn *John and me saw* on the 'logical' grounds that 'subjects are nominative' is rather like insisting that penguins should get up in the air because 'birds fly'.

As Pinker points out (1994: 374), many prescriptive rules are so psychologically unnatural that only those with access to the right kind of education can learn to observe them. Once acquired they can serve as shibboleths, differentiating the elite from the rest ('I'm better than you because I get my pronouns right.'). To admit that these rules are mistaken or unimportant would mean abandoning such easy claims to superiority, as well as accepting that the effort expended on learning the rules was wasted. Not surprisingly, therefore, prescriptive rules have long lives.

It is unfortunate that a good deal of time is lost, in some educational systems, by insistence on a command of the standard variety at a level of correctness which goes far beyond any practical value that standardization may have. Uncertainty as to the effectiveness of explicit language instruction can also contribute to inefficiency, as educational philosophy swings from one extreme ('Kids today can't write a correct sentence – bring back grammar!') to the other ('This grammar teaching isn't doing a bit of good – kids today can't write a correct sentence!'). At the time of writing, it seems that the British National Literacy Strategy, brought in in 1998 to improve literacy through explicit grammar instruction, is about to be abandoned as we move into the second phase of the cycle.

However this may be, efficient grammar instruction, up to a point, is surely important in education. If knowledge of a standard language, spoken or written, is advantageous, it is clearly desirable that children be given accurate information at least about those more important aspects of its grammar which they find difficult to get right, in the hope that this may feed into more accurate linguistic performance. Well-informed grammar teaching can have other advantages. It can counteract the devaluation of non-standard dialects and their speakers by providing a more accurate view of language variation. It can perhaps help to illuminate the ways in which public attitudes can be deliberately manipulated by language (Cook 2003), as did the study of rhetoric in the Middle Ages. And, of course, the study of the workings of the mother tongue has general educational value in the same way as, for instance, the study of biology. Perhaps more so. After all, as Walter has put it (2008): while children are taught about photosynthesis, no child is called on to photosynthesize, but all children use language.

GRAMMAR IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING
Foreign languages have always had an important place in many educational systems, for both cultural and practical reasons. And with the steady growth in international communication, travel and emigration, more and more people now need to learn other languages – especially world languages such as English, Mandarin, Arabic or Spanish. However, foreign language study is time-consuming, expensive and difficult. Any language contains grammatical features which are hard to master after early childhood, whether because of their structural complexity, as with Russian noun morphology, or because they signal abstract meanings which are not easily grasped if the mother tongue does not encode equivalent concepts, as with article systems in western European languages. Teaching professionals are therefore faced with questions of principle to which there are no very clear answers. How much grammatical correctness should be expected of learners? How much is feasible: *can* foreign-language learners become as native-speaker-like as is considered desirable? What type of grammatical model is appropriate? What kinds of input and practice activity will enable learners to internalize the grammatical systems of the foreign

language most effectively? Opinions in these areas have varied very widely, and continue to do so. The learning and teaching of grammar, in Larsen-Freeman's words, is 'the vortex around which many controversies in language teaching have swirled' (2003: 9).

The choice of a grammatical model is perhaps partly a non-question. Granted, theoretical perspectives on first-language acquisition may have some apparent relevance for foreign-language pedagogy. Views about whether 'Universal Grammar' remains available for the learning of new languages can impact on the question of what is, or is not, regarded as teachable and learnable (White 2003; Slabakova 2009). Usage-based models, which see grammatical knowledge as emerging by abstraction from patterns detected in the input (N. Ellis 2003 and this volume), can be invoked in support of 'lexical' approaches. In general, however, foreign language teaching does not seem to depend on specific theoretical models, and attempts to import, say, transformational grammar, cognitive grammar or construction grammar wholesale into the classroom have not been shown to work well. Theoretical grammarians seek relatively abstract generalizations which can be applied to languages and language as a whole. Day-to-day teaching, on the other hand, is directed at people who already have an implicit knowledge of how language works in general, and who are more concerned with language-specific details than with ways in which these details fit into higher-level abstractions.

The most useful kind of grammatical model as a starting-point for teaching, therefore, is arguably descriptive rather than theoretical – the close-to-the-surface picture offered for instance for English by Quirk et al (1985), Huddleston and Pullum (2002), or by the smaller grammars which teachers and students generally use. In this area, pedagogy owes a very considerable debt to linguistic research, past and present. Much of what we know about English grammar was established by early twentieth-century scholars from Jespersen (1909) onwards. More recent work in discourse analysis and related fields has greatly enriched our understanding of grammar above the sentence level. Although language corpora are not new – Jespersen and his contemporaries based their work on substantial written corpora, and even spoken corpora are over half a century old – their exploitation has been transformed out of recognition by our current ability to compile and analyse massive electronic databases of authentic language in use (see Adolphs and Lin, this volume). This makes it possible not only to verify and refine our traditional grammatical descriptions, but also to detect previously unobserved regularities and ongoing changes. Corpus analysis also allows us – in what amounts to a knowledge explosion – to investigate in detail the frontier between grammar and lexis, amassing far more complete and reliable information about the structural behaviour and external relations of individual words and word families than was previously available. In addition, technological developments have made it easier for structural descriptions to cover the whole range of spoken, written and signed language and to explore the significant ways in which these differ (see for example Biber et al 1999; Carter and McCarthy 2006; Woll and Sutton-Spence this volume).

There are, however, crucial differences between descriptive and pedagogic grammars. Most importantly, a pedagogic grammatical description of a language is necessarily fragmentary. Time constraints do not allow language learners to learn, or their teachers to teach, anything approaching the whole of a language. The findings of

descriptive grammarians, discourse analysts, corpus researchers or others cannot therefore be fed directly into teaching programmes: they only provide menus, from which course designers must select those high-priority elements that can be taught in the time available. While a descriptive grammar will aim at complete coverage, a pedagogic grammar will consequently miss out or simplify material of lesser practical importance. Further, a pedagogic grammar does not describe a language from a neutral standpoint. Ideally, it provides information which learners do not already possess, glossing over or leaving out what they already know by courtesy of their mother tongue. This may be a great deal. No learners need to be told that a new language has nouns and verbs. For Mandarin speakers, English SVO word order is unproblematic. French-speaking learners take it for granted that English relative clauses follow their nouns, and that they do not contain resumptive pronouns (whereas Japanese learners do need to be told where to put relative clauses, and Farsi-speaking learners do need to learn that, for instance, *That's the man that he sold me the bike* is not grammatical in English). German-speaking students of Italian (unlike Polish learners) need relatively little information about article usage. The very boundaries between grammar and vocabulary may be drawn differently for different learners. English *because*-clauses constitute a grammatical topic for students whose mother tongue does not handle clause structure on the European model; however, speakers of most European languages only need to learn that *because* corresponds to *perchè*, *parce que*, *weil*, *fordi, jer* or whatever. English prepositions are vocabulary for Swedish speakers, whose language also has prepositions; for Finnish speakers, whose language expresses the relevant notions mostly by noun-endings, prepositions are a difficult grammatical category. For these and other reasons (Swan 1994) a pedagogic grammar for a given group of learners may look very different indeed from an academic descriptive grammar.

Methodological questions in this area are especially intractable, and find few reliable answers. (For a detailed survey of past and present views on methodology, see Thornbury, this volume.) Does grammar teaching have any effect on learning? Most teachers probably think so, but how can we be sure? If students' grammar improves, is this because of the teaching, or would it have improved anyway as a result of unconscious acquisition processes acting on the input? If grammar teaching does work, how should it be approached? In particular – the key question – how useful is explicit instruction? When students learnt to read and write classical languages, this question was less crucial. In the time necessary to write a Latin sentence, a rule like 'use the subjunctive in indirect questions' could easily be recalled, and the appropriate form of the relevant verb retrieved from a memorized paradigm. Spontaneous speech is a very different matter: structures have to be chosen and forms retrieved far too quickly for conscious control to be exercised. This being so, is systematic explicit attention to structure a valuable starting-point nonetheless, on the basis that one can get from declarative to procedural knowledge of language 'by engaging in the target behaviour … while temporarily leaning on declarative crutches' (DeKeyser 1998: 49), with a progressive reduction of conscious attention to form (Johnson 2001: 195)? Or is the grammar of a language best learnt incidentally in the context of communicative activity, as many current SLA theorists believe? Or is it pointless to pose the question in such general terms – does the answer depend mainly on the nature of the grammatical feature in question, the personality of the learner, the learning context, or other factors? While a great deal of valuable research has addressed this problem over the last half century or so, we are still a long way from a solution.

Successive approaches to language teaching are often described in terms of pendulum swings between one type of stance and its opposite. Although the metaphor is over-simple (especially in implying that there is no progress), it does have some validity. As a formal code, used to convey meaningful messages, a language necessarily has a dual character. Reflecting this, teaching philosophies oscillate between the two poles of form and meaning, control and freedom, imitation and expression, knowledge and skill, learning and using. At any one time, theorists and researchers claim that they have, at last, got the balance right, unlike the previous generation who, it is now clear, were excessively committed to a formal or functional view of the matter. The role of grammar in all of this – central, marginal or non-existent – depends largely on the current position of the pendulum.

At the time of writing there is a modest rehabilitation of grammar instruction in second language acquisition (SLA) theory, and a partial rejection of the earlier claim of Krashen (1981) and others that explicit grammatical teaching is irrelevant to the acquisition of linguistic competence. (See Norris and Ortega 2000; R. Ellis 2006.) Theoretically informed attitudes to language teaching are however still coloured by the heavily communicative bias of the last 30 years, and are situated well down towards the meaning-freedom-expression-skill-using end of the pendulum-swing. Language proficiency is often measured in 'can-do' terms (as in the specifications for the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework* 2001); with the danger that doing things with language may assume more importance than systematically learning the language needed to do the relevant things. Skills and strategies can receive more attention in teaching programmes than grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Grammar and pragmatics are often yoked together, to their mutual disadvantage (Swan 2007). Naturalistic 'real-world' activities are widely favoured, in the belief that classroom experience should approximate as closely as feasible to mother-tongue acquisition and use. 'Learner-centred', 'meaning-based', 'holistic', 'discourse', 'discovery', 'process', 'interaction', 'negotiation' and 'strategy' are good things to say. 'Teacher-dominated', 'form-based', 'discrete', 'sentence-level', 'transmission model', 'product', 'memorization', 'repetition' and 'drill' are not so good. The view that 'now, at last, we have got the balance right' surfaces in the common claim that language teaching has moved into a 'postmethod' era (e.g. Kumaravadivelu 2006). As Bell (2003) makes clear, however, postmethod thinking is not at all methodologically neutral. Kumaravadivelu's list of 'macrostrategies' (2006: 201) for language teaching has a powerful communicative orientation: while it refers to such things as negotiated interaction, learner autonomy, intuitive heuristics, social relevance and the raising of cultural consciousness, it has nothing whatever of substance to say about language and how to teach it.

Current orthodoxies, like earlier attitudes, are heavily dependent on hypotheses, often promoted with more assurance than they merit. To cite one among many: some researchers assert that linguistic regularities can only be effectively learnt during genuine communication while learners are carrying out 'real-world' tasks: interlanguage restructuring (it is claimed) is triggered by incidental 'focus on form' and conscious 'noticing' during communicative activity, for instance while resolving communication breakdowns (see for example contributions to Doughty and Williams 1998). For criticism of this and some other currently influential hypotheses, see Swan (2005).

Fashionable research interests can easily bias language-teaching content and methodology. This has sometimes been the case recently, for instance, with discourse grammar, pragmatics, the emergence of grammar from lexis, and formulaic language. Some specialists in corpus linguistics have stepped outside their territory to make powerful pedagogic recommendations regarding the use of corpora and 'real' corpus-attested language in teaching materials and practice. (For critical discussion see Carter 1998; Cook 1998; Widdowson 2003.) The specific research context can also create bias. Many scholars in the field have gained the bulk of their experience in 'English as a second language' (ESL) situations, working with university-level learners studying in English-speaking countries. Such learners typically have rich language input outside the classroom, and having studied English for many years at school, they may know far more than they can use effectively. This can naturally encourage a focus on language use, and away from systematic study of the linguistic basics. Unfortunately, theoretically-sanctioned approaches such as task-based teaching (R. Ellis 2003; Willis 1996), while suitable for students of this kind, may be far less suitable for many of the world's language learners, who are working under very much tighter time constraints in very different situations. The ESL bias also means that researchers work mostly with multilingual groups; this may explain a baffling feature of present-day mainstream SLA theory: the almost complete neglect of learners' mother tongues, as if these had no relevance to their learning of new languages. (Butzkamm and Caldwell 2009; Cook 2010). It is also worth bearing in mind that experiential-learning models designed for teaching English (a language with few inflections) may not work well for languages which require beginning students to master parts of complex morphological systems.

Despite decades of research and theorizing, we still know little about the acquisition of second-language grammar, and pendulum swings will continue. One thing that could perhaps reduce their amplitude is a more realistic conception of what we are about. Teachers often seem to assume – consciously or unconsciously – that learners should aim at a close approximation to native-speaker competence. This is quite unrealistic: language learning and teaching are difficult, only a relatively small part of a language can be learnt in the time generally available, and limited success is all that can be hoped for. More general recognition of this fact might reduce the recurrent tendency to reject a viable language-teaching approach in the disillusioned belief that it has 'failed', only to replace it with something else that may work no better. In this connection the current interest in English as a lingua franca, and the associated questioning of native-speaker norms as an appropriate target for learners (see for example Kirkpatrick and Deterding, this volume), is an extremely constructive development.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Grammatical analysis may not, as classical philosophers believed, give us information about the world. Nor, probably, does it give us a direct insight into the nature of cognition. None the less, the cluster of mechanisms that we call 'grammar' is central to language, and it is language that enables us to conceptualize and theorize about our world, to progressively expand our knowledge, and to consolidate and pass on our discoveries through cultural transmission. This being so, the better we understand grammar – what it is, how it operates in language and languages, how it is acquired, how it is instantiated in the brain – the better our grasp is likely to be of the many

human activities and concerns in which language is implicated: from foreign-language teaching at the most practical extreme, through the many other matters that engage the attention of applied linguists, to the very nature of consciousness itself.

RELATED ARTICLES

Many articles in this volume deal with matters discussed or touched on above: in particular those on clinical linguistics, cognitive linguistics, corpus linguistics, forensic linguistics, generative grammar, key concepts in language learning and education, language emergence, language teaching methodology, neurolinguistics, second language acquisition, sign languages, sociolinguistics, stylistics, systemic functional linguistics and world Englishes.

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BIODATA

Michael Swan is a freelance writer specializing in English language teaching and reference material. His interests include descriptive and pedagogic grammar, cross-language influence, instructed and naturalistic second language acquisition, and the relationship between applied linguistic theory and language-teaching practice.

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