

WHAT IS A PEDAGOGIC GRAMMAR?

Gaylene Devlin

School of Languages, Auckland Institute of Technology

When the title character in C.S. Lewis' *Prince Caspian* has to study grammar, he uses a text by Pulverulentus Siccus called *Grammatical garden or the Arbour of Accidence pleasantlie open'd to Tender Wits*. Not all grammar texts try to be so agreeable. Grammar is an essential part of Caspian's education in Narnia, as it has been up to this century in our world. In second-language teaching, the Grammar-Translation method relied heavily on the explicit teaching of grammar. With the advent of Direct and Audio-Lingual Methods, there was a move away from it. No one can reasonably deny that languages have grammatical structures but there is disagreement about what to include in a definition of grammar, about the role of explicit grammar teaching in language learning and about the form any grammar teaching should take.

Certainly (and traditionally) grammar includes morphology and syntax. But is this sufficient? here is an example of a sentence complete with a 'grammatical' analysis:

base verb transitive	past tense affix	pron.3sing.m affix	noun	feminine marker	preposition	(feminine) noun
<u>d</u> 3	• n	• f	s • t	r		niwt
main verb		subject	direct object		adverbial prep. phrase	

This analysis shows the shape of the sentence and the general relationship of its parts. But from this analysis alone the sentence could say (among many other possibilities):

- He knocked the she-bear down with a rock.
- He ferried the woman across to the town.
- He sauteed a nun with enthusiasm.
- He composed the princess during cabbage.

What is missing, of course, from our grammatical analysis is any consideration of meaning. (Sentence b. is in fact correct.) This example, I would argue, is not a frivolous one. Meaning and grammar in a sentence are inextricably tied, and by considering only English examples it is too easy to take meaning for granted. Case grammar is concerned with meaning, and we will look at an example of its use later.

The grammar of a sentence must then include morphology, syntax and semantics. Can we go further? Consider this sentence:

He put the chicken on his plate and ate them.

By itself this sentence looks wrong, either grammatically or nutritionally. But what if this sentence is preceded by:

As he was about to eat his chicken, the King gave him 2 gingernuts.

Now the meaning and the grammar of the sentence are clear, but we had to go outside the sentence to achieve that clarity.

One possibility is that the kinds of rules which operate within sentences operate between them as well: that grammar, to put it another way, does not stop with a full stop but reaches over it. (Cook 1989, 7).

Grammar then may also include elements of discourse.

At the far end of this expanding scale of grammar definition are transformational and descriptive grammars. The intent of these is to explore the real and underlying structures and processes of language: they do not aim to be useful to L2 learners. At this end of the scale we also find Universal grammar (UG). Unfortunately, as exciting and important as the insights of UG may be, they are of limited practical usefulness:

Many feel that the UG model is the most powerful account of L2 learning. . . . The UG model tackles the most profound areas of L2 acquisition, which are central to language and to the human mind. But there is rather little to say about them for language teaching. . . . Any view of the whole L2 learning system has to take on board more than the UG model. (Cook 1991, 120).

In fact, with Universal grammar we do, in a manner of speaking, boldly go so far that we meet ourselves coming back. As Cook observes of UG: L2 learners need to spend comparatively little effort on grammatical structure, since it results from the setting of a handful of parameters. They do, however, need to acquire an immense amount of detail about how individual words are used. The learner needs to acquire large numbers of words . . . [and know] how they behave in sentences. (Cook 1991, 118-9).

We may not be calling it grammar here, but "how individual words are used," and words "behave in sentences" these are still very much the concern of second language learners and teachers.

Pedagogic grammar is a practical teaching and/or learning tool. It is selective, eclectic and purpose- and audience-centered. (*Appendix A* gives a selection of *aims* from eight English and foreign language grammar texts). To assist language learning, it explains structures and processes in terms that the learner can understand. As it is always aimed at the learner's level and needs, it is - like language teaching generally - always changing:

It [teaching] must balance grammar against language functions, vocabulary, classroom interaction, and much else that goes on in the classroom. Teachers do not necessarily have to choose between these alternatives once and for all. A different decision may have to be made for each area of grammar or language and each stage of acquisition. (Cook 1991, 27).

Pedagogic grammar does not attempt to give a complete 'scientific' description of language but only to explain, for teaching purposes, how features of language work. This is not to say that pedagogic grammar need be haphazard or inaccurate but it must take into account teaching usefulness as well

as adequacy of language description. Pedagogic grammar exists in teachers' oral explanations, on whiteboards, on worksheets and in coursebooks as well as in grammar books. It exists at all levels. It is conceivable that a class of children, for example, could be told the story of how Sally Subject meets Verna Verb and they go looking for Ollie Object.

If we were teaching English word order to an older audience, the word order would not change but our approach certainly would. Let us say, for example, that we are working with a group of young adult Japanese students and we want to work on basic word order up to easy question forms. They will have a good knowledge of 'textbook' English: what they will lack is experience in producing English sentences. So what we want to do is draw on their background knowledge without becoming too caught up in textbook terms ourselves. In Rutherford's words, "methodologically speaking, grammar in this sense is not so much 'in command of learning' as it is 'in the service of learning'". (Rutherford 1987, 153). We can begin then by reminding our students of the pattern (different from normal Japanese word order)

S VP [O]

and practise it in the simplest terms (*I read. I close the book.*) before expanding the verbs (*I am reading. I have closed the book.*). Japanese does have subject-sentences so that idea will be familiar while the different order is reinforced. What we would then like to do is consider the meaning of a sentence and show that the subject *does something* or *is something*: the subject *Xes* or *is X*. We could perhaps borrow here from case grammar and call X the predicator. Sometimes we have a choice (*She teaches. She is a teacher*). Sometimes there is no parallel verb available, so we need 'be': **He surgeons. He is a surgeon*. Now we can have:

<u>S</u>	<u>P</u>
<u>You</u> are <u>speaking</u> English.	
<u>John</u> is <u>unhappy</u> .	
<u>They</u> were <u>students</u> .	
I <u>love</u> chocolate ice cream.	

So we can show that, whether or not the predicator is a verb, the order is Subject - Predicator. Now when we come to question forms, we can show:

- (i) that whereas Japanese questions are marked at the end, English questions like these are marked at the beginning;
- (ii) that although we change the *overall* order of words, and move or add words (particularly verbs), we do *not* change the order Subject - Predicator:

Are you speaking English?
 Is John unhappy?
 Were they students?
 What kind of ice cream do I love?

Clearly, this is a general approach and the exact presentation would depend on the real background, ability and response of the students. But the goal would be the same: to raise the students' grammatical consciousness (in Rutherford's phrase) to the point where they can see how structures and meanings - that they know in Japanese - work in English sentence patterns.

It is possible to argue that language learning does not need such overt grammar teaching. After all, L1 is learned without it. A student then can learn L2 if exposed to a sufficient amount of data and given sufficient opportunity to try (and get feedback on) hypotheses. Given the nature of language, this approach may take a very long time. Why not focus the student's attention on a 'subset' of grammar? Thus, "from this subset of grammatical properties the learner is thus able to project to grammatical phenomena that may not themselves have been present in the data to which he was exposed. (That the learner is able to do this has been reported many times in the research literature on language acquisition.) (Rutherford 1987, 151).

Furthermore, L1 and L2 acquisition are not the same. As Cook writes of one difference: ". . . the L2 learner often has grammatical explanation available as another source of evidence. The usefulness and success of this can be debated. Nevertheless it reflects an entirely different type of evidence for the learner that is absent from first language acquisition, at least up to the school years" (Cook 1991, 118).

With students such as our Japanese above, who have (in addition to their own language) a 'textbook' knowledge of English, to make no direct appeal to that background would be to ignore one of the great strengths that adult learners bring to L2 study.

There is another point in support of grammatically explicit teaching: it is economical. While it may be possible to 'talk around' language points, there are certainly cases where terms like *verb*, *indefinite*, *subject*, *countable*, *adverb* will save teaching time. For example, it might not be easy to 'talk around' an explanation of the difference in structure and intonation between these sentences:

There's a key under the desk.

There's my key under the desk.

Let us look at how a few English coursebooks approach this topic of "There is/there are" sentences.

SOME ENGLISH COURSEBOOKS

A Communicative Grammar of English is aimed at "the fairly advanced student, for example the first year university student" (Leech and Svartvik 1975, 10). Under the heading **Introductory there** we find almost a full page of examples and explanations. Examples include only declarative sentences (singular, plural) and questions (singular) - no negatives or answers. Vocabulary includes *unstressed*, *indefinite subject*, *main verb patterns*, *passive*, *front-placed adverb*, *concord*. The need for an indefinite subject and "be" is made clear. The informal use of 'is' with a following plural is given. In this account, **there** is regarded as an introductory word and the subject as postponed.

English Alive 1 is aimed at students who "are not expected to have any previous knowledge of English" (Nicholls et al 1977, ix). The lesson on this topic covers two pages and uses pictures, dialogues, exercises and a small chart. Examples in the Student's Book are limited but well complemented by suggestions in the Teacher's Book. Between them they include declarative sentences (singular - count/non-count - and plural). In spite of the brevity of treatment, the coverage is really quite good. The Student's Book uses no grammatical terms; the Teacher's Book uses *countable* and *uncountable*. There is no suggestion that these words be used in the lesson; rather the emphasis is on extensive drill to make the difference clear.

Coast to Coast 1 is "primarily for 'false beginners': people who have come into contact with a small amount of English . . . but cannot use it at all." (Harmer and Surguine 1987, 10). The topic is covered on two pages using drawings, examples, dialogue and exercises. More examples are given in the Teacher's Book. The emphasis is on the use of the structure in questions: *Is there/Are there*. Examples include singular (non-count) and plural (count) questions and short answers (yes/no, singular/plural). Full declarative sentences are emphasised only towards the end of the lesson. The Student's Book uses no grammatical terms; the Teacher's Book uses *count nouns* and *non-count*. Again, there is no suggestion that grammar be mentioned; points are to be made by drill and elicitation. The first example of the construction that students see is: *How many of these large tanks are there?* — not perhaps, the best way to begin.¹

New Incentive 1 aims to give students "a sound grasp of the structures they need to talk and write about what is familiar to them" (Fowler et al 1982, 7). The topic is covered on four pages of a 6-page unit including pictures, dialogue, exercises, examples, reading and a full chart. The unit uses singular and plural count nouns, the only non-count being *bread* in the chart at the end. Affirmative/negative is covered in statements, questions and short answers. The Student's Book uses no grammatical terms, but organises examples into a full chart which emphasises singular/plural and word order. The Teacher's Book is divided between concerns of presentation and specific discussion of language points. The inclusion of *Yes, they are/ No, they aren't* alongside *Yes, there are/No, there aren't* is potentially confusing at this point.

AKL: Beginning "is a book for beginners" (O'Neill 1981, v). The topic is presented on two pages with drawings, dialogues, questions, exercises and a brief chart entitled *Look at the grammar*. The Student's Book examples are affirmative, declarative sentences, singular and plural, using count nouns only. Question/answer forms are mentioned once in the Teacher's Book:

Is there a . . . in that room?
 . . . Yes, there is./etc.

In spite of the chart title, there is no specific discussion of grammar in the Student's Book, though there is mention of stress and revision of plurals in the Teacher's book. Possibly confusing here is the use, in the second dialogue example, of: *There is a sink, a shower and a toilet in the bathroom*. There is no reference to this more informal use, and the other examples carefully follow strict agreement.

Those English coursebooks then, though they present and teach grammatical forms, may not explain or even discuss grammar explicitly. These books teach largely by example and pattern rather than by explanation. Although they cover the same structure, they vary greatly in completeness and emphasis of coverage, in fullness of discussion and in clarity of example. We would expect much more from a grammar 'proper', like *A Communicative Grammar of English*.

Let us consider in more detail one section of another English grammar text.

Longman Advanced Grammar is "for advanced students of English as a foreign or second language,

working on their own or with a teacher" (Alexander 1993, 8). Its aims are:

- 1 To serve as an advanced 'text decoder', using the analysis of syntax as the key to understanding difficult text.
- 2 To provide practice in advanced points of grammar.
- 3 To serve as an advanced reference grammar . . .

Keeping the audience and aims in mind, let us consider the 'Grammar terms and concepts' section. Some strange contradictions begin to appear.

One contradiction is that the introduction states that:

Familiar grammar points pose unusual problems because, all their learning lives, students have been given an over-simplified view of them. Common rules, such as the use of the present progressive to describe actions and events in progress at the moment of speaking, must be extended. . . .Advanced level material therefore requires a deeper understanding. *Longman Advanced Grammar*, 9.

A good point. So we look up 'present progressive tense' and find only this definition:

This is the progressive form of the simple present tense . . . which describes actions or events which are in progress at the moment of speaking. *Longman Advanced Grammar*, 285.

What happened to extension and 'deeper understanding'? Another contradiction is that the introduction states that:

We never lose sight of the fact that our underlying concern is with meaning, not with the sterile analysis of language for its own sake. *Longman Advanced Grammar*, 10.

Again, this sounds good. But why, then, later give us full definitions, with examples, of 'complex', 'compound', and 'compound/complex' sentences? The concepts of co-ordination and subordination may be important to understanding the meaning of a text, but knowing the terms 'complex' and 'compound' adds nothing to the understanding of meaning. The terms are useful *only* in the discussion of style or "analysis of language".

There are other anomalies within the "Grammar terms and concepts" section. One further example will suffice here.² The entry for "-ing form" begins:

Some people avoid the terms GERUND and PARTICIPLE because it is often difficult (and unnecessary) to distinguish between the two. Instead, the term -ing form is used to describe any word ending in -ing. *Longman Advanced Grammar*, 278-9.

Any word? Then we have formation and examples of three uses: progressive tense/participle; gerund; adjective. Then this sentence:

The gerund is often used in COMPOUND NOUNS and should not be confused with the adjectival form. *Longman Advanced Grammar*, 278-9.

. . . although it is unnecessary "to distinguish between the two".

There is much that is good and useful in *Longman Advanced Grammar* and here we have picked on a few small inconsistencies. But inconsistencies like these are noticeable, and they can undermine

confidence in the book both as a text for learners 'working on their own' and as a reference grammar.

L2 learners need to know the grammar of the target language. It may be taught directly or indirectly, by a teacher or by a book. But the pedagogic grammar made available to students should be the result of knowledge, care and application.

NOTES

- 1 As this book includes the following, it positively attracts scrutiny:

COMPLETENESS

The components of *Coast to Coast* provide all the material that the teacher and student need for effective language learning. (10)

- 2 Two further reservations:

A. Under 'split infinitive', after definition and examples, we find this:

Many native speakers object to splitting the infinitive on grounds of style and insist on: *I want completely to understand what your argument is*, etc. even if this often sounds distorted.

From this definition a learner could be left

- (i) wondering how distortion can be a desirable style;
- (ii) thinking that this 'native speaker' objection has respectability;
- (iii) unaware that this 'objection' is a survival of a prescriptive rule based on Latin rather than English.

B. Under the entry for **concrete noun**, the explanations and (particularly) the examples are suspect:

- countable uses (physical and individual existence):

a girl, a desk, an army, a litre, a packet, etc.

-uncountable uses (physical but not individual existence):

cotton, barley, rice, camping, etc.

An army? A litre? *Camping*? Unless a learner already knew the differences, this definition might not be very helpful.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, L.G. (1993) Longman Advanced Grammar. London: Longman.
- Churchward, C.M. (1941) A New Fijian Grammar. Suva: Government Press.
- Coe, N. (1980) A learner's grammar of English. Surrey: Nelson.
- Cook, G. (1989) Discourse. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cook, V. (1991) Second Language Learning and Language Teaching London: Edward Arnold.
- Davis, N. (1953) Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fowler, W.S. et al (1982) New Incentive 1. Surrey: Nelson.
- Gardiner, A. (1957) Egyptian Grammar 3rd ed. Oxford: Griffith Institute.
- Hall, N. and J. Shepherd (1991) The Anti-grammar Grammar Book. London: Longman.
- Harmer, J. and H. Surguine (1987) Coast to Coast - Teacher's Manual 1. London: Longman.
- Leech, G. and J. Svartvik (1975) A Communicative Grammar of English. London: Longman.
- Morris, W.H. (1917) Elementa Latina. London: Longman-Green.
- Nicholls, S. et al (1977) English Alive 1 - Teacher's Book. London: Edward Arnold.
- O'Neill, R. (1981) AKL: Beginning. New York: Longman.
- Rutherford, W.E. (1987) Second Language Grammar: Learning and Teaching. Longman: London.
- White, J.W. (1878) First Lessons in Greek. Boston: Ginn and Heath.

APPENDIX A: SOME TEACHING GRAMMARS AND THEIR AIMS

The dates given are for the first (or earliest available) edition. Some of the earlier non-English-text prefaces sound (although in a different context) surprisingly modern.

It [this book] sets out to avoid giving students rules. Instead it casts the students in the role of 'thinker', providing them with cognitive problem-solving tasks to discover grammatical rules and meanings for themselves. . . . The material is intended for upper-intermediate and advanced students who have met most of the tenses and verb forms of the language. . . the tenses or verb forms are reviewed for remedial purposes and to give students an overall picture of the tense and verb form system.

The Anti-Grammar Grammar Book, Hall and Shephard, 1991.

This grammar is a reference book for foreign learners of English, and I hope that it will also be useful to their teachers. . . . The explanations are as simple as possible, but it is always necessary to use special words to talk about different features of grammar, for example *count noun* and *mass noun*, or *present simple* and *past simple*. In this book these words are written in italics. This is to remind the reader that they are grammatical names; they are not descriptions of structures or meanings.

A Learner's Grammar of English, Norman Coe, 1980.

The book is intended primarily for the fairly advanced [overseas] student, for example the first-year university student. . . . We offer you a new perspective on the subject [grammar], which relates grammatical structure systematically to meanings, uses and situations. In this way we hope you will improve and extend the range of your communicative skills in the language. The book also supplies the essential information about grammatical forms and structures which you will need, and can therefore be used as a general reference book or sourcebook on English grammar.

A Communicative Grammar of English, Leech and Svartvik, 1975.

These lessons are designed to carry beginners through the principal inflexions of Latin words, and to teach them their use in construction of easy sentences. . . . The construction of sentences is taught on a simple system of Analysis, supplemented by a few Syntactical rules. . . . Lesson D shows how the simple form of sentence may be expanded by the addition of a Possessor, a Recipient, or an Instrument.

Elementa Latina, W. H. Morris, 1917 (35th impression).

The following treatise . . . is an attempt to explain the structure and laws of the Fijian language (Bau dialect), not on the basis of English or of Latin, but on its own basis. . . . For though declensions and conjugations have a rightful place in the grammar of many other languages, they are utterly foreign to Fijian, and any attempt to force them upon it can only complicate instead of clarifying . . . Part 1 affords a general survey of the whole ground, showing the principal features, but omitting such details as might tend to confuse, rather than to guide, the average beginner. . . . I have endeavoured to treat the subject-matter in such an order as is likely to be most helpful to the student who desired to gain, step by step, a practical and intelligent knowledge of the Fijian language.

A New Fijian Grammar, C. M. Churchward, 1941.

In the belief that an elementary introduction on the lines of *Primer* is essential, I have tried in the present revision to preserve the policy and scale of Sweet's work, while rearranging it very considerably in detail. In the grammar . . . I have sought to present the facts, with as few technical terms as possible, in the same groups as students will find when they come to more advanced books. . . . In so limited a space the grammar could not aim at anything like completeness. It sets out to cover the texts in this book . . . but I hope that it will serve also as a working elementary grammar for wider use.

Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer, (1882) revised by Norman Davis, 1953.

For some years it was part of my work to instruct beginners in Greek. During that time the method of this book, which is in some regards peculiar, was developed. . . . It will, perhaps, hardly be necessary to give reasons for the introduction of the verb at the very outset. . . . We would teach Greek, as far as the changed conditions will allow, in the natural way in which in adult years we learn to speak a modern language. In this case, the object being *the expression of thought*, about the first thing that we do is to put noun and verb together. . . . When the student first learns their [verb mood] forms, he should at once have the more common of these uses explained to him. The proposition is the element of language, and from this individual words and forms derive their whole relational significance.

First Lessons in Greek, J. W. White, 1876.

When the plan of the present work was first conceived, little more was intended than to provide English-speaking students with a simple introduction to Egyptian hieroglyphs. . . . It soon became apparent, however, that the book was destined to obtain a wider scope. . . . And so what has remained in form a book for beginners has become in substance an elaborate treatise on Egyptian syntax. . . . To the Exercises I attach the greatest possible importance. Without them the beginner might well be bewildered by the mass of information imparted. . . . The Egyptian-English vocabulary . . . will, it is hoped, enable students to translate easy pieces.

Egyptian Grammar, Sir Alan Gardiner, 1927.