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Chapter 9

The grammars of English

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INTRODUCTION

Grammar or grammars?

Most dictionary definitions of the word 'grammar' include some reference to 'system', 'structure', 'syntax' and 'morphology'. Many proceed with a description of the word as (1) a mass or uncountable noun referring to this system, sometimes modified to describe a theory of grammar (*Chomskyan grammar*), the grammar of a specific language (*Korean grammar*), or a set of prescribed rules (*poor grammar*) and (2) a count noun referring to a book about grammar or grammar rules (*19th century grammars*).

As the title of this chapter suggests, we deal with both grammar and grammars, discussing the overarching conceptual definition of grammar, and describing some of the key approaches to the models and theories of grammar. We take a historical look at prescriptions and descriptions of grammar, and the evolution of books about grammar. We illustrate how variation plays a central role in a discussion of grammar and grammars and finally, consider the issues relating to teaching and learning grammar.

Grammar, according to Carter and McCarthy, consists of two basic principles: "the arrangement of items (syntax) and the structure of items (morphology)" (2006:2). However, as they go on illustrate, a reduction of grammar to its basic principles tells us only about its form or structure but not about its usage. Carter and McCarthy draw attention to the difference between grammar as structure and grammar as choice, pointing out that when we speak and write, we make choices from a range of options available to us to create meaning. These

choices are dependent not just on the surrounding words, phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs, but on whole texts, or strings of discourse. Added to this, the choices reflect our surroundings, the time and place where the text or discourse is created and, crucially, the relationships between participants. We use grammar to create relationships, to interact and convey messages and meanings for our own communicative purposes (see McIntyre and Price, Philip, and Pihlaja this volume). It is an ever-changing and dynamic resource which is at the disposal of its users, and yet it is viewed by many as a "linguistic straitjacket" (Larsen-Freeman 2002: 103) filling many of its users with despair.

Definitions of grammar abound with references to 'rules', 'correct use', 'accepted principles', with prescriptions and proscriptions. Grammar is bound up with issues of acceptability. Some of these rules and principles are stable, others are dynamic and subject to change. Opinions on acceptability vary, and historically grammar rules have been socially contentious (see section 1.2). As Carter and McCarthy (2017: 2) aptly put it, "grammar has long been a source of controversy, with age-old themes rearing their heads periodically". In this chapter, we will attempt to explore some of these issues.

Books about grammar: a historical perspective

Historical perspectives on grammar are intrinsically linked to the evolution of reference books about grammar, where rules were kept and answers found. The lineage of books about English grammar is traced back to the 1500s. Their existence sprang from the desire to match the grammar books of Latin which were used at the time. In fact, many were written in Latin as this was seen as more scholarly (Linn 2006). Bullokar's *Pamphlet for Grammar,* published in 1586, is widely held to be the first proper book on the grammar of English and it shows us that the eight basic parts of speech that we are familiar with today are found to have been well established 400 years ago (Linn 2006; McCarthy 2017). As Linn (2006) notes, the Latin grammar cast a long shadow on the early history of English grammars. Latin was associated with learnedness and had a godliness associated with its used in the church. Any deviation from the description of a rule which did not fit with the Latin grammar paradigms was seen as an untruth (Linn 2006).

Bullokar's 1586 grammar was initially designed for and read by privileged, so-called learned, adult males (Linn 2006). However, as British commercial activity grew, especially towards the second half of the seventeenth century, the focus on writing grammar books for learned scholars was superseded by a more pressing need for material for an audience outside Britain, especially those learning English (Linn 2006). This motivation is reflected in the fact that by the end of the seventeenth century, there were 270 new English grammar books (Linn 2006). Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar, with critical notes* (1762) is the grammar most widely known from the eighteenth century. Howatt and Widdowson (2004) say that though Lowth (who was Bishop of London) claims to have written the grammar for "private and domestic use", it went on to make him the most famous grammarian of his time. The influence of his work extended into the nineteenth century through his disciples Murray and Corbett (discussed below).

An important innovation in the Lowth's grammar is that he included possible errors as footnotes. These footnotes had an express pedagogical purpose and for Howatt and Widdowson (2004) tracing the origins of English Language Teaching (ELT), this was a very noteworthy characteristic. At the time, Lowth caused some controversy and disturbance in pointing out grammar errors as there were instances of such errors in prestigious works, implicating some eminent authors of the time, including Pope, Swift and Addison. Aitchison (2001: 11) notes that many grammar books in use today have "laws of 'good usage' which can be traced directly to Bishop Lowth's idiosyncratic pronouncements as to what was "right" and what was 'wrong'".

This concept of using footnotes to illustrate typical errors was taken up and further developed by Murray. McCarthy (2017) lists Murray's *English Grammar, Adapted to the different classes of learners* (1795, 1st Ed, 1809 16th Ed) as one of the most popular and influential works. Although Murray was a disciple of Lowth, it is interesting to note how the title indicates a change and broadening of target audience. This shift in audience is a defining feature of the nineteenth century grammars and is in line with massification in education that was emerging at this time. This shift was often reflected in their titles; for instance, Edward Shelley's *The people's grammar; or English grammar without difficulties for 'the million'* (1848). Later editions of Corbett's work, *A Grammar of the English Language, In a Series of Letters*

(originally published in 1818) had the fascinating sub-title of *Intended for the Use of Schools and of Young Persons in General; But More Especially for the Use of Soldiers, Sailors, Apprentices, and Plough-boys. To which are Added Six Lessons Intended to Prevent Statesmen from Using False Grammar and from Writing in an Awkward Manner.* Brown's *Institutes of English Grammar* (1823) became part of mainstream schooling in the US. Linn (2006) comments on its stern influence right into the twentieth century: "Brown did more than anyone, at least in America, to cement the popular association of grammar study with inviolable rules and, by association, with rules of propriety and morals" (Linn 2006: 77).

From written to spoken

Another key shift is the move beyond solely focusing on written language as the baseline for grammar rules. Towards the end of the 19th century, attention turned more systematically to the spoken language and this was linked to the development of the field of phonetics (as well as a more scientific approach to linguistics in general). Most notable is the work of Sweet (1899, 1900). Both his 1900 *A new English Grammar: logical and historical. Part I: introduction, phonology, and accidence* and his 1899 work *The Practical Study of Languages: a guide for teachers and learners* underscored the importance of the inclusion of spoken language integral to any grammar work. Sweet's influential work at the turn of the twentieth century asserted the principle that spoken language was not a corrupt form of written language and that it should be the starting point of any language description. His early work described many of the core features of what we now refer to as spoken grammar, including parataxis (the placing of two phrases or clauses side by side without a connecting word), phrases (now often referred to as clusters) and ellipsis (Carter and McCarthy 2017). The work of Palmer (1924) is seen as the most significant of the early twentieth century in terms of asserting the importance of the inclusion of the spoken word in descriptions of English grammar. His work *A Grammar of Spoken English* (1924) displayed an in-depth understanding of the grammar of speech and discourse, with insights like the greater use of coordination of clauses rather than subordination in informal spoken contexts.

The influence of corpora

Modern grammars are based on real samples of language in the form of language corpora. Corpora are large, principled collections of real spoken or written language that that allow for large scale linguistic analysis using corpus software (see Philip, this volume). Two major impacts of the use of corpora on grammar were firstly, a shift from prescription about what should be said or written to description about what is found in the empirical data (see section 2 below), and secondly, a gathering momentum to work on spoken grammar as distinct from written grammar.

The seminal works which mark the beginning of this new era of empirically-based grammar books are Quirk et al. (1972) and Quirk et al. (1985). Randolph Quirk is seen as the father of modern grammar descriptions. His early corpus endeavours led to the Survey of English Usage, which in turn led to Quirk et al. (1972) and, what Leech (2015) refers to as the "mega-grammar", Quirk et al. (1985). Leech (2015) notes that with the ability to look and describe language using a corpus, came the responsibility (and sometimes burden) of unbiased objectivity through the "principle of total accountability" (2015: 146), that is, making use of all relevant data in the corpus and not shying away from data that does not appear to fit received paradigms. As Leech puts it, a grammarian using a corpus, "cannot ignore data that do not fit his/her view of grammar, as theoretically oriented grammarians have sometimes done in the past" (2015:147).

A major innovation in the evolution of corpus linguistic tools in terms of analysing grammar was automated Part-of-Speech (POS) tagging (Green and Rubin 1971). Leech (2015: 148) points out that this innovation meant that it became relatively simple to extract instances of even "abstract categories such as progressive aspect or passive voice". The next level up from POS tagging is to automatically parse a corpus syntactically, but as Leech puts it, this has "proved a more difficult nut to crack" (Leech 2015: 149).

Until the advent of corpus linguistics, grammar books were largely socially derived prescriptions about the grammar one should use. Corpus linguistics brought a descriptive turn. This meant that large bodies of evidence about how grammar was used was laid before linguists. As a result, language could be studied in terms of how it varied across contexts and

users. Most of all, what technology did was take away the subjectivity about how grammar was described. Those who wrote grammar books had to be objective. They simply had to detail what the data told them and not what they thought should be the case.

CURRENT CRITICAL ISSUES AND TOPICS

What is interesting about the current critical issues and topics relating to grammar is that they are those which are already referred to in a historical context. In other words, many aspects of grammar are perennial issues.

Prescription vs description

Many associate grammar with what one 'ought to' use, and this is referred to as 'prescriptive grammar'. Larsen-Freeman sees prescriptive approaches to grammar as contributing to a "general unease", where "even proficient users of a language fear making mistakes, such as using *me* instead of *I* or choosing *who* when they should have chosen *whom*" (2014: 257). Descriptive approaches, on the other hand, describe how language is actually used at a point in time, regardless of whether it conforms to what is prescribed (or even proscribed). Prescriptive views on grammar are often associated with a value judgement – classifying and polarising language use into 'good' and 'bad' grammar depending on whether it observes or violates pre-defined rules. There is a perception that if 'good' grammar is not upheld then it is a sign that our social fabric is under decay. The reality is that language is a dynamic system which is subject to change. Continual language change, according to Aitchison, is "natural and inevitable" (2001: 221). As we have seen from the historical perspective set out in section 1.2 above, some of those structures and features that are considered to be indications of decay today were the rules and standards of yesterday.

Carter and McCarthy (2006) note that prescriptive rules are often social rules that are believed to "mark out a speaker or writer as educated or as belonging to a particular social

class" (2006: 6). They give two classic examples of prescriptive rules: 1) Do not end a sentence with a preposition (for example, *This is something you should not be involved **in***), and 2) do not split an infinitive (for example, *I except **to** shortly **welcome** him here.*) (ibid). Throughout their grammar, Carter and McCarthy (2006) describe where, in reality, these and other prescriptive rules are broken. Interestingly, they concede, "it is important that learners are aware of the social importance which attaches to certain prescriptive rules while at the same time being aware of the way in which English is used by real speakers and writers of the language" (2006: 6).

As section 1 makes clear, historically, books about grammar were prescriptive but since the advent of language corpora, descriptive grammar books have become the norm. Leech (2015: 146) goes as far as saying that, since the electronic era, the term 'descriptive grammar' has become redundant. All corpus studies of grammar, he notes, inevitably make use of the evidence of grammatical usage as observed in corpora. However, the descriptions of grammar from language corpora, regardless of how impartially they are drawn, can still cause social furore if they threaten the socially-accepted perceptions of what grammar should be.

Variation, varieties, standards and acceptability

Establishing a standard grammar, for some languages, has meant that one dialect has officially been chosen for standardisation. Crucially, this was not the case with English. As Trudgill and Hannah (2002: 1) detail, standard English has been through a process in which it has been "selected, codified and stabilized", in a way that other varieties have not. Standard English, they say, acquired its status more gradually and in a more organic manner. It did not entail a standardising committee but rather the upper classes wrote in their own dialect and then were in a position to impose this as the standard use (ibid).

Trudgill and Hannah (2002: 2) define standard English as the variety whose grammar has been described and given public recognition in grammar books and dictionaries, with its norms considered to be correct and constituting good usage. They note, however, that this

codification, which aims for stabilisation and uniformity, is only relative and that the standard English used in different parts of the English-speaking world differs noticeably from one place to another. Trudgill and Hannah (2002: 2) indicate some of the grammatical peculiarities of standard English which distinguish it from most other varieties (see Table 1).

Table 1 Examples of standard English grammar rules which usually distinguish it from non-standard varieties

<insert Table 1 here>

There is, of course, a circularity involved in concepts such as variation, varieties, standards and acceptability. What drives acceptability is a standard codified model of language, but a standard is socially- rather than empirically-derived and ultimately it is linked to status and power. The creation of, or orientation towards, a standard ultimately lays down what is acceptable and, most importantly, what is not. By revering a standard, one is placing some regional and national forms of English at a lower status of 'variety'. These non-standard forms can then be described in terms of their difference or 'deviation' from the socially-constructed norm of the standard grammar, lexis and phonology.

A by-product of the eighteenth century drive towards the codification of what is standard and acceptable British and American English was the casting out of what was different to these standard varieties. Regional varieties, dialects (e.g. Cumbrian or Tyneside English) and national varieties (e.g. Scottish, Irish or Canadian English) have been described over the years in terms of their variation from the norm. To quote Hickey (2010a: 3), "... the standard became more and more characterised by its non-regional character. The divorcing of preferred public usage from regionality and local identity meant that the emerging standard was an essentially non-regional form of English."

In their major corpus-based grammar book Biber et al. (1999), referring to grammatical variation in English, note that it would be wrong to assume that standard English is fixed grammatically. Their descriptions of grammar account for this variation in terms of contextual factors. They say, "the notion that the standard insists on 'uniformity' - allowing just one variant of each grammatical feature - is a serious fallacy, arising from a misleading

application to language of the notion of 'standard' and 'standardization' taken from other walks of life" (1999: 19).

Larsen-Freeman (2014) observes that traditional morphosyntactic definitions of grammar overlook "the thousands upon thousands of patterns that make up a speaker's knowledge of a language" (2014: 257) and that with increasing knowledge from the field of corpus linguistics, it has become clear that grammatical structures and lexical items occur in a large number of regularly-occurring patterns and many of these are fixed. This has brought to light the need to consider lexicogrammar rather than limit our view to morphosyntax alone.

The contemporary reality is that English is used globally, by billions, and as Schneider (2016: 339) points out:

> [It] is not only a variety or even a set of young varieties any longer – it is a globally available resource for speakers, including speakers with limited access to formal education, employing it for their own communicative purposes in creative ways. It is used in transnational interactions of whatever kind to which the participants bring their respective linguistic backgrounds and use it creatively.

Quirk (1990: 6) made a useful distinction between 'use-related' and 'user-related' varieties in English. He defines use-related as a variety that a speaker or writer "assumes along with a relevant role", giving examples such as legal English or literary English and he states that a person may have "mastery of several such varieties." He contrasts this with user-related varieties where a person is "tied to one only", citing examples as British English or American English (1990:6). Each of the use-related contexts brings with it a set of conventions. It is worth reconsidering this dichotomy years on and in light of the global use of English and the convergent role of the internet and social media. In an updated model, we can say that we use English in so many roles and personae now, both private, institutional and virtual and that, more and more, there is a tendency for a blurring of the lines in terms of our user-relatedness to any one standard variety.

Spoken grammar vs written grammar

The advent of corpora, in combination with sophisticated recording and storage technology, facilitated the gathering and analysis of spoken language. Hitherto, descriptions of grammar had been largely generalised from the written form. McCarthy and Carter (2001) were at the forefront of identifying the need to describe the grammar of spoken language. McCarthy and O'Keeffe describe this spoken grammar as "the grammar that we find in regular and repeated use by the majority of native- and expert-speakers of a language in the majority of their spoken interactions" (2014: 272). They distinguish between these everyday conversations and specialised types of speaking such as speeches, lectures, sermons, interviews, etc. each with their own and shared characteristics. They point out that, in the 1970s and 1980s, at a time when English language teaching was encouraging a focus on "the interpersonal functions of language", within a communicative and skills-led pedagogy, what was known about spoken language was "hardly adequate" (McCarthy and O'Keeffe 2014: 273). Since this time language corpora have enabled new insights into defining a spoken grammar, "offering evidence from spoken data that everyday conversations manifested common grammatical phenomena that were marginalised in description and neglected in pedagogy" (Carter and McCarthy 2017:1).

However, Leech (2000) argues that the grammar of speaking and writing is one and the same, and that grammatical divergence lies in differing contexts of use, both written and spoken, rather than its mode, written or spoken. He argues that grammar plays a more significant role in writing than in conversation/speaking which he considers to be syntactically less complex, tending towards disjunctive construction. Carter and McCarthy acknowledge differing distribution across contexts of both written and spoken use but argue that the grammars used in spoken contexts should not be based on writing "as a sort of spin-off" (Carter and McCarthy 2017: 6, see also Section 1 above). They point out that this unitary position does not account for those grammatical phenomena that are characteristic of the spoken language and "differently distributed" or "markedly more frequent" in spoken than written language. Nor does it account for grammatical phenomena that are exclusive to speaking and independent of writing.

KEY AREAS OF DISPUTE AND DEBATE

Models of grammar

Many differing models and theories of grammar and approaches to grammatical analysis have evolved over the years. This section gives a brief overview of some of the key theories and approaches. The differences between these models and approaches can be simplistically categorised as those concerned with the internal formal structures of grammar – grammar on the inside - and those concerned with the usage of grammatical structures – grammar on the outside.

The generative grammar theory is a formalist theory which conceives grammar as a context-free set of rules and principles. This approach was first formalised by Chomsky in 1956. There have been many iterations of the generative grammar theory since the 1950s though common to all is an effort to establish a set of rules that defines natural language. The Chomskyan view holds that all languages are variations of one Universal Grammar (UG) and that each individual possesses an innate system of rules able to form grammatical *sentences* in a given language. This is a formalist theoretical view of language which focuses on syntax and morphology and does not consider usage. It divorces linguistic *competence* from *performance*. In Chomsky's words the "Generative grammar provides the systematic definition of a sentence. Grammatical sentences are those that are generated by the grammar" (1980: 27). The Chomskyan approach views grammar as a biologically-conceived system of the mind and a window into the language faculty of the mind. Generativists show that humans are able to distinguish things that are grammatical in a language from things that are ungrammatical, irrespective of context and meaning. A famous illustration of this is Chomsky's example of the contrast between "*colourless green ideas sleep furiously*" and "*furiously sleep ideas green colourless*". The first example is deemed to sound grammatically 'correct' to the expert user and yet not meaningful while the second sounds neither 'correct' nor meaningful. Establishing reliable universal finite rules to account for a vast array of infinite utterances is inevitably a complex undertaking and one which has dramatically evolved over the years and taken many different turns, many of which have been subsequently abandoned.

In taking this approach, Chomsky was moving away from the views of the structuralists and early applied linguistics who viewed language as a relational system emerging from patterns of usage. Grammar from a Chomskyan perspective is top-down and rule-governed, rather than bottom-up and emergent. He sees it as "modularised, encapsulated and divorced from performance, lexis, social usage and the rest of cognition" (Ellis 2011, 655). Critics of generativism considered the approach to be overly theoretical, abstract and complex.

In contrast to the formalist approach, which dominated the 1950s and second half of the twentieth century, was the re-emergence of functionally-based theories of grammar which hold social context and usage at their core. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), founded by Halliday in the 1960s and associated with the Prague School, is one such theory. It views language as a system of relationships, in which the structural features are described in relation to the functions they fulfil and the meanings they create within contexts of use. Unlike the generativists, SFL sees form, function and meaning as inseparable. According to Halliday, when children are learning grammar they are learning how to mean (Halliday 1975). While formalist theories viewed grammar as a mental state, from a nativist, biological perspective, Halliday views grammar as a structural resource which humans draw on for use in different environments. Halliday's model thus takes a social environmentalist perspective. According to the systemicists, language is an ongoing series of structural and lexical choices that fulfil different social and cultural functions. As the name suggests, SFL endeavoured to describe both the system of grammar and its activity or function. Emerging from SFL was the term lexico-grammar, which Halliday uses to describe the interdependence of lexis and syntax. The advent of corpus linguistics facilitated greater identification of lexico-grammatical patterning in language and from this came Sinclair's 'idiom principle' (Sinclair 1991), which proposes that written and spoken language consists of preconstructed phrases and that grammar is used as a back-up device. Central to Sinclair's work is the importance of colligation and collocation in a description of language.

Another model which counters the notion that grammar is wholly formal focuses on how meaning-based grammatical constructions emerge from acts of language use. Tomasello (2003), drawing on the work of antecedents, provides a usage-based theory of language acquisition which holds that children come to the process of language acquisition equipped

with two sets of interlinked cognitive skills - they can identify what language is used for (function) and they can identify patterns of language used in specific functions and ultimately they learn to use these productively. In essence, this model holds that language structure emerges from observed language use. Through various cognitive processes, grammar, which Tomasello refers to as "a structured inventory of linguistic constructions" (Tomasello 2009: 86) is formed from the language that we hear being used around us as children. This model has been adopted by Ellis and his associates to explore patterns of second language acquisition (SLA). The use of corpus data has proved useful in evidencing usage-based theories of language which, in an SLA context, hold that usage leads to commonly occurring form-meaning pairings becoming entrenched as grammatical knowledge in the learner's mind. More frequent forms are experienced more by learners and can become entrenched earlier in the language acquisition process (Ellis et al. 2015).

Grammatical knowledge: do we need it?

A BBC TV programme (2016), *School Swap*, documents the brief visit of three 18-year old state-educated pupils from South Wales to a South Korean school. During the programme one of the three English-speaking students is asked to explain the difference between the present perfect and the past simple. He simply can't. He appears deeply embarrassed and yet throughout the programme he uses both structures with ease. He is an articulate, confident user of his own language and his inability to name and explain the nuts and bolts of his first language does not stand in the way of his ability to use it fluently, competently and creatively.

The grammar that the student uses so proficiently is the set of principles and codes that he subconsciously refers to in order to create his language. The rules governing the differences that he cannot explicitly articulate are a set of consciously codified rules, the types of rules found in grammar books. Users of a first language frequently display implicit automatic knowledge of the language and its formulaic patterns while acknowledging a lack of explicit knowledge of the so-called rules. For many second language learners the reverse often seems to be true. Why is it so important to those learning a second language not just to learn the

language but to also learn about it?   What greater understanding of a language do you gain by explicitly learning and knowing the grammar and how does that explicit knowledge convert to implicit understanding and use?

Second language grammar teaching and learning has long been the subject of much debate and research. Since the infancy of second language acquisition research there have been many discussions about how to teach grammar, what to teach, when to teach it and whether the teaching of grammar is necessary at all. What follows is a brief account of some of the key debates relating to grammar teaching and learning.

How do we learn the grammar of another language?

In line with a Chomskyan UG perspective, Krashen (1982) argued that teaching grammar had very little impact on subconscious language acquisition. Krashen argued for learners to be exposed to 'comprehensible input', believing that, given adequate and rich input, the grammar of a language will be unconsciously acquired. He contended that there was no interface between explicit teaching and implicit knowledge. Krashen's findings on a natural order of acquisition of English morphemes appeared to substantiate this perspective. (See Murakami and Alexopoulou (2016) for a recent alternative stance on order of acquisition.) Long (1991) later argued for a less extreme approach, taking the view that teaching grammar should not be ignored but it should be executed in a communicatively focused way that would not disturb the natural order of acquisition. He put forward a 'focus on form' perspective where learners attend to grammar forms as they meet them rather than a 'focus on forms' approach involving systematic treatment and attention to a traditional step-by-step syllabus of grammatical structures. The focus on form was designed to draw on the strengths of communicative language teaching by combining attention to both form and meaning. Teachers were encouraged to react to problems with comprehension or 'ungrammatical' utterances incidentally as they happened during the course of meaningful communication, with a brief diversion to attend to the grammar if necessary. An important aspect of this approach was to encourage students to notice. Noticing theories are grounded on the assumption that learning requires attention. Schmidt's (1990, 2012) Noticing Hypothesis is based on the belief that comprehensible input alone is not enough. Schmidt contended that, as

an integral part of the process towards implicit knowledge, learners need to detect and take explicit notice of specific linguistic features of the input.

A review of many second language teaching contexts today would indicate that a traditional approach to the teaching of grammar appears to prevail. Even the shift towards communicative language teaching, with a focus on function over form, has not led to an abandonment of explicit and traditional grammar teaching. Larsen-Freeman, in an overview of the impact SLA and applied linguistics research on grammar learning and teaching, attributes this to "long-standing views on the importance of grammar teaching by teachers and by those who set educational policy" (2015: 264).

Assuming that grammar teaching in the classroom is not about to be abandoned (at least in the short term), there continues to be a debate over how to teach it: explicitly or implicitly, deductively or inductively, what types of tasks and input to use, and how best to go about error correction and feedback. Traditional grammar teaching adopted a structural syllabus, often delivered using a Present, Practice, Produce (PPP) model involving a presentation context for a chosen grammar point, followed by a series of controlled practice exercises of spoken drills and written exercises, and concluding with opportunities to use the grammar point in freer communicative contexts. A theory behind this approach involves automatizing the use of the rule to the point where the learner no longer consciously refers to the rule. There is a body of evidence which shows that, through practice and repetition, explicit knowledge can become implicit (DeKeyser 1997), but crucially, according to Pienemann (1989), the learner has to be developmentally ready to acquire it. Critics of this maintain that the means used to test the effectiveness of explicit knowledge on implicit knowledge were based on decontextualised tests of discrete items in contexts such as gap-fills and sentence reformulations. However, studies such as Swain and Lapkin (1998) and Spada and Tomita (2010) *inter alia* illustrate that an explicit focus on a given grammatical feature can lead to spontaneous, contextualised usage.

How should we teach grammar?

A central question in teaching grammar is whether rules about grammar should be given to

learners through a teacher-led deductive approach or whether they should work them out for themselves taking a discovery-led inductive approach. Various studies have shown that different aspects of grammar lend themselves better to one approach over the other. DeKeyser (1997), for example, has shown that learners appear to learn morphosyntactic rules more effectively through explicit, deductive learning whereas more complex syntactic features are most effectively taught through an inductive approach. Willis (2003) argues that the approach adopted should be driven by the nature of the grammar point in question and that an explicit approach is likely to be more suitable for a point which is largely a matter of form, whereas a grammatical feature requiring more complex conceptual understanding may need a more awareness-raising approach. Timmis (2015) picks up on this, pointing out that in the otherwise inductively-driven corpus-informed course *Touchstone*, the authors take an explicit traditional PPP approach involving overt explanation and practice in their treatment of the interactive role of *though* as a linking adverbial in conversation, a high frequency feature of spoken language which has almost non-existent presence elsewhere in ELT materials. McCarthy, one of the Touchstone authors, asserts that for the very reason that their insights about *though* and other corpus-informed revelations are revolutionary, the ways in which these innovations are presented need to remain familiar (2004). Overall it would appear that despite many studies reviewing the value and efficacy of both approaches, neither a deductive nor inductive approach has been consistently favoured (Ellis 2006).

The field of Second Language Acquisition is populated with a lineage of experimental studies of how grammar is taught and how grammar is or is not learnt. What is striking from all of this body of work, over the last 30 years especially, is how little we still know about how best to teach and learn grammar and indeed what grammar to teach. There are so many variables involved in learning that it is difficult to standardize studies and make them comparable. What appears to work for one cohort, may not be replicable in another group, at another age, language level, from a different educational background and culture, and so on.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Language as a system is a dynamic entity. As part of this process, its grammar will never be entirely fixed and uniform. In the era of globalisation, and especially in the context of

English, this change is all the more rapid and, at times, disparate. And yet, socially, there is often a plea for fixedness in English grammar. Advances in technologies that allow us to capture and store speech and writing language in mega-corpora have given linguists the capacity to monitor language variation and change. Through these tools, we can observe and describe how grammar has and is changing.

Language corpora are also bringing empirical insight into the process of first and second language acquisition. Surprisingly, given all of this innovation, grammar instruction appears to have been relatively unaltered by research findings. It remains traditional for the most part, with grammar teaching centred on accuracy of form and paradigmatic learning, where mechanical exercises are seen as the way of bringing about learning. Looking ahead, it is fair to assume that many more studies will enhance our understanding of the processes of grammar acquisition in first and second languages and yet we speculate that overt grammar teaching will not have gone away from first or second language classrooms.

What is certain about the future is that grammar will remain a contentious topic but the furore comes more from the public than from linguists. As language scholars, our role in relation to grammar is to collect, observe and describe change and to be mindful of Crystal's (2011) warning that the only languages that don't change are dead ones. As he points out, all living languages change because they have to. They exist through the people who use them. And because people are changing all the time, their language changes too. For future linguists, the challenge is to describe the widely changing and varying grammar of English in its global contexts of use.

FURTHER READING

Carter, R.A. and McCarthy, M. J. (2017) 'Spoken Grammar: Where Are We and Where Are We Going?' *Applied Linguistics 38* (1): 1-20. (This paper reflects on twenty years of corpus based work on spoken grammar. It reinforces the importance of its inclusion in any pedagogical grammar.)

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McCarthy, M. J. (2017) *English Grammar: Your Questions Answered*. Cambridge: Prolinguam Publishing. (This book is a highly accessible and entertaining description of present day standard English highlighting some of the current and ongoing concerns about grammar usage.)

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RELATED TOPICS

- The historical study of English
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- Standards in English
- The relevance of English in higher education
- Teaching English as an additional language (TESOL)
- Corpus linguistics: Studying language as part of the digital humanities

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