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WHY DODOS AND OSTRICHES DON'T LAY FERTILE EGGS: INPUT AND INTAKE IN THE ACQUISITION OF GRAMMAR

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Preliminary results of a study that I am undertaking on first-semester students at Graz University in the area of what is usually referred to by reference grammars as 'indirect or reported speech' clearly show that whilst students are able to carry out traditional written grammar exercises such as transforming direct into indirect speech, they have very great difficulty in using indirect speech to report information that they have obtained themselves in an authentic interview situation. In this paper I shall suggest reasons as to why, despite the fact that this area of grammar is taught intensively at school, it remains an 'infertile egg' and consider the question of what represents 'comprehensible input' to the learner, both in this and other areas of grammar.

1. The Acquisition Spectrum

As far as instructed¹ foreign language learning is concerned, we can identify three general areas which contribute to the overall goal of fluent and accurate performance:

- a) input by the teacher and textbook
- b) the acquisition-aiding strategies and mental processes employed consciously or unconsciously by the learner, or intake
- c) the methodology and classroom techniques used by the teacher to facilitate acquisition.

Both within applied linguistics and language teaching the past few years have seen a powerful swing of the pendulum in the direction of the learner. Under the strong influence of first-language acquisition studies and of naturalistic and humanistic approaches to language learning the question of input, which in the 1970s was given so much attention, has tended to fade into the background. It is the 'input' area of the grammar acquisition spectrum which will be the focus of this paper since I believe that it represents one of the major problems in modern grammar teaching, a view also expressed by Dirven (1990) in his state of the art survey article on pedagogical grammar:

Next to the development of solidly graded, authentic input materials, a major assignment for foreign language pedagogy is experimental research into adequate

¹ I shall prefer the term 'instructed' (see Ellis 1990) to 'formal' (Krashen 1982; Dirven 1990) since 'formal' will be used in this paper to contrast with 'semantic'.

forms of rule formulation and presentation. It is astonishing that so little research has been carried out in this area.

2. Present Status of 'Grammar Input'

Since the advent of the communicative approach the nature of grammar and how it can be split up and packaged as input to the learner has not received adequate attention. Today teachers can find books which explain how grammar is acquired by the learner and many books on classroom methodology that can be applied to practise certain aspects of grammar but very little usable information which explains what grammar actually is and how it functions as part of a communication system, except in very general theoretical terms. In the absence of the categories necessary to define grammatical objectives, often the only solution for teachers is to fall back on traditional, formal categories. This inevitably leads to the widely held view that grammar is the 'non-communicative', 'non-creative' part of language learning. The 'dodos' of my title refers to those grammarians and teachers who do not challenge the terminology, categorization and certain aspects of methodology of traditional grammar. If we take an honest look at grammar teaching in many European countries, it cannot be denied that dodos are far from extinct but are alive and flourishing.

In the light of this, it is perhaps hardly surprising that in the 1980s there was an "anti-grammar backlash" which appeared to sound the death knell for any type of instructed grammar. Whether Krashen's term of 'comprehensible input' was a theory, a label or a rediscovery of the wheel has been the subject of much discussion. Whatever it was, it was seen to represent a counterpart to 'formal grammar' and led to the interpretation that a synthetic, bit-by-bit approach to grammar was in some way incompatible with the notion of message-based comprehensibility, especially when accompanied by rules or explanations from the teacher. The syllogism that appeared to underlie this interpretation was: learners need comprehensible input; grammar is not 'comprehensible'; therefore learners don't need grammar. This is the 'ostrich' view of my title - that we pretend that grammar need not or should not be taught at all and, left to itself, will be acquired quite painlessly, as in first language acquisition. In the following discussion I shall take the view that it is a fallacy that grammar input cannot be comprehensible. However, it is important that the term 'comprehensible input' should not be trivialized and used as a slogan but that we devote some attention to understanding how it relates both to grammar and to the learner.

3. Grammar as Comprehensible Input

At its most trivial level, comprehensible input (CI) can be defined as a new item or piece of language the meaning of which is clearly apparent to the learner. Whether grammar can be seen as CI rests on how we define it or describe it. If we stress the

formal, structural aspect in a way that subordinates meaning, then clearly we are contradicting the whole theory of message-based input as a bridge to acquisition. However, this by no means needs to be the case. It is perfectly possible to analyze grammar on the basis of the messages that it transmits between speaker and listener. In order to do this we must recognize that we cannot take as our starting point a list of sentences which we record, categorize according to similarity of form and finally analyze outside of the real-time and contextual constraint which are concomitant with any act of speaking, but that we must instead devise some mode of analysis that categorizes grammar in terms of the dynamic system of mental perceptions and social norms which steer the choice of forms in actual situations. In other words, our categories must have *psychological validity* in that they seek to reflect the forms of storage and types of mental processes that actually exist in the minds of native speakers. I shall give some attention to this important question in the next section.

There is, however, another important aspect to grammatical input. All grammatical choices are based on tacit knowledge that steers a speaker's choice of form; that is to say, 'rules'. If a rule has not been internalized, it is not possible to use the corresponding piece of grammar systematically and correctly. In instructed foreign language learning, it is usual for teachers not only to provide language input but to give - or for students to discover - grammar rules. In any discussion of input it is therefore necessary to consider the rules that can be found in pedagogical grammars since they have the potential either to confirm or to contradict the input from the language itself. As Dirven (1990:9) says:

learners can be and are misled into all kinds of wrong generalisations both by the inaccurate rule formulations in their textbooks and by the unpedagogical sequencing or grading of the domains of grammar.

What has been said so far concerns input. However, any discussion of CI needs to include certain factors that might affect, or effect, *intake* by the learner, who is after all not a *tabula rasa* waiting to swallow up any data provided by the teacher as long as the bits are small enough to chew, but is already the successful user of his/her first language and brings into the learning of a second language not only certain kinds of specific language-related knowledge, such as mental processes and parameters, but also an awareness of the types of communicative functions which language can fulfil and the contexts in which it can be used. It is important, therefore, that the way language is presented to the learner also takes these factors into account.

Brown (1987:104), quoting Stevick (1976), talks of various types of 'alienation' experienced by language learners, such as 'alienation between the critical me and the performing me, between my native culture and my target culture' etc. This notion can be usefully extended to discussions of input and intake in grammar teaching. Perhaps more so than with any other foreign language skill, many learners experience what might be termed an '*intake barrier*' towards grammar: that is, alienation or conflicts resulting from the nature of the input they are given, which hinders successful

acquisition. Some degree of conflict is, of course, inevitable since very often a new grammatical meaning requires the learner to modify or expand the cognitive categories which have so far comprised his/her grammatical competence. Nevertheless, by making a close analysis of the nature of language and thus the nature of input, it should be possible to reduce or eliminate other areas of alienation which arise from a formal approach to grammatical description, the artificiality of the contexts or situations in which grammar is often presented and the denial of the uses to which grammar is actually put. To reduce or minimize the intake barrier, the following four principles should be followed:

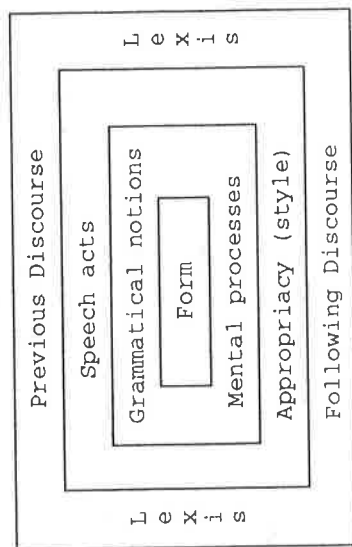
1. Input should reflect the storage categories and mental processes which comprise the native speaker system and thus have psychological validity.
2. Any rules that are given should seek to account not for single sentences taken out of context but for the underlying system of grammatical choices available to a speaker.
3. Input should, wherever possible, link up with the student's unconscious awareness of language and how it works - its universals or parameters - and thus facilitate acquisition.
4. Input should establish a link between grammar and context and thus provide a stepping stone to use and feed into communicative methodology.

4. Two Ways of Describing Grammar: Formal vs Notional

At the essence of any discussion of grammatical description is the question of whether we see grammar primarily as a system of forms, which in turn express certain meanings, or as a systematic network of meanings, which are encoded into forms. The different points of departure will take our modes of description along quite different routes and will lead to considerable differences in both the nature and the scope of our rules. The ultimate pedagogical aim of a formal description will be to teach the learner how to form correct sentences; of a notional description, how to encode and decode thoughts in situations. The former will see grammar as a product; the latter, grammar as a process. The former will derive its rules from what might be termed 'observational logic'; the latter will appeal to psychological validity and will attempt to reproduce the 'model of reality' (Johnson-Laird: 1985) stored in the brain that steers grammatical choices.

If we accept that the 'intake barrier' is in direct inverse proportion to the degree of psychological validity of the input, it follows that a grammatical description must be based on a 'communication model' view of language which reflects how grammar is generated in actual situations. Such a model is shown below.

Figure 1: A 'Communication Model' of grammar



It should be added that there is no conflict between a notional approach and the teaching of grammatical forms: however, the form is seen as the output of the sum total of choices made within the outer boxes in the communication model. As Widdowson (1990:98) says:

A communicative approach, properly conceived, does not involve the rejection of grammar. On the contrary, it involves a recognition of its central mediating role in the use and learning of language.

The communication model enables us to explore this 'mediating role' not only with regard to forms but to other types of meaning, such as lexical meaning, pragmatic meaning, stylistic meaning etc.

5. An Example of a Notional Approach: 'Indirect Speech'

I stated earlier that a formal grammar is oriented towards the product of grammar and focuses on the sentence, whereas a notional grammar describes thoughts and processes. To illustrate the different outputs of each type, I shall take the area of grammar usually referred to as indirect or reported speech.

The following extract is taken from Greenbaum/Quirk (1990:298):

Several changes are usually made in converting direct speech to indirect speech. If the time of reporting is expressed as later than the time of the utterance, there is generally a change of verb forms. The change is termed BACKSHIFT, and the resulting relationship of verb forms in the reporting clauses is known as the SEQUENCE OF TENSES.

DIRECT SPEECH

- i) present
- ii) past
- iii) present perfect
- iv) past perfect

BACKSHIFTED OR INDIRECT SPEECH

- past
- past or past perfect
- past perfect
- past perfect

Virtually all reference grammars state this or a similar set of rules, differing only on whether the past tense of direct speech is reported as past or past perfect. But where do these so-called rules come from?

The basis of this view seems to be a comparison between the product or the forms used in direct speech with the forms used in indirect speech. Using what I have termed 'observational logic' grammarians then proceed to conclude that indirect speech derives from a process of backshifting during which one tense is transformed into another. This in turn leads to the much loved exercise type, in which students are presented with sentences which they must convert - as if they were mathematical strings - from one form into another. These strings might include not only tenses but also adverbs of time and place and even pronouns ('I' becomes 'he/she'). Proficiency in indirect speech is often equated with the ability to convert uncontextualized sentences in this way.

Yet if we actually think about indirect speech as a *dynamic process*, in which speakers in actual contexts report their thoughts about or memories and impressions of previous conversations, it soon becomes apparent that backshifting rules are based on a totally false view of what happens when speakers report. Due to memory and other processing constraints, at the time of reporting speakers no longer have the exact words of the direct speech in their minds at all, except in very exceptional circumstances. But this in no way prevents them from reporting. It may be the case that the speaker whose 'speech' is being reported did not in fact use a verb in his/her direct speech, so there is nothing to backshift, yet this does not prevent the use of indirect speech. This can be seen from the following example:

DIRECT SPEECH DIALOGUE:

A: Brenda better?

B: Yes, much thanks.

INDIRECT SPEECH:

Kevin said that his wife was much better.

What speakers in fact report is a general semantic representation of utterances or their own interpretation of the underlying meaning and not the original words at all. This semantic representation is equally apparent in reports of mental processes where actual words are not used, such as thoughts and dreams: '*I thought you were ill.*' '*I dreamt I was in heaven.*'

Yet if we dismiss backshifting, what rule can notional grammar offer? After all, the choice of the past tense in the above examples still needs to be explained and must have some cognitive/semantic basis. If we see indirect speech as a process rather than a product, we have to eliminate the tense of the direct speech from our considerations and

redefine direct speech as a 'situation' rather than as a form. It follows from this that the rules which steer the choice of tense in reporting are no different from the rules which steer any other tense choices: in all the above examples, the reporter uses the past tense because he/she is thinking back to a situation which was experienced at a definite point or period in time in the past - the time of the conversation, thought, dream etc. It is this past situation that leads to the choice of tense, not the fact that indirect speech is being used. If we list sentences that include a reporting verb (eg 'say') side by side with sentences that do not, we will find that the perceptual basis for the choice of tense is the same and has nothing to do with reporting or backshifting as such, as in the following examples:

Yesterday I met John. I *could see* he *was going* to church because he was carrying a bible.

Yesterday I met John. He *said* he *was going* to church.

Yesterday I met John. I *guessed* he *was going* to church.

Yesterday I *dreamt* that John *was going* to church.

This is not to say that indirect speech - or 'reporting words and ideas', to use a more process-oriented formulation - does not represent a learning problem and can be excluded from teaching. However, the rule - and therefore teaching objective - becomes a mode of thought rather than a set of tenses: the student must understand that when reporting words or ideas speakers of English think back to the time of the conversation, meeting etc. and it is this that steers their choice of tense.

Product-based backshifting rules flout all the principles of psychological validity and are prime examples of 'dodo's eggs'. They contribute to the 'intake barrier' by contradicting natural language processes and by forcing a set of rules upon the learner which prove to have no practical application in actual use. For language teachers attempting to make use of communicative methodology, backshifting rules also lead to alienation since this approach imposes on them a set of classroom techniques and exercises which are obviously at odds with communicative principles.

6. Categories of a Notional Grammar

The process view of reporting is only one example of one type of speaker-oriented category that can serve as the basis for a general notional description and which can be incorporated into a reference grammar or into syllabus design and teaching materials. There are four general categories which reflect a notional approach:

A. *Processes or modes of thought that steer certain sets of meanings.*

Examples:

Reporting words and ideas (formal grammar: indirect speech)

Describing processes (formal grammar: passive voice)

b) Appropriacy:

Requests:

Informal: Can I borrow your pencil?

Polite: Could I borrow your pencil?

Formal: May I borrow your pencil?

In these examples, the speech act is the same, but the grammatical choice can give an indication of the attitude or relative social role of the speaker.

c) Previous/following discourse:

A: *Have you ever been to Salzburg?*B: *Yes, I have. I was there last September.*A: *Did you like it there?*B: *No, it was full of linguists...*

Grammar rules and exercises tend to concentrate on isolated meanings or forms. Where there is reference to other meanings, it is usually to contrast them, often in a sentence-level contrastive exercise. In real life, however, speakers use grammar in text or discourse structures and the single items do not contrast with each other but complement each other.

By including all these contextual variables in syllabus design, in rule formulation and in teaching materials we will not only give a more communication-oriented view of grammar, but may also reduce the intake barrier of learners since we are allowing them to relate grammar to their own knowledge and experience, and - given the right methodology - to use the grammar they are in the process of acquiring for need-related and task-based performance.

7. Conclusion

In my paper I have stressed the importance of taking an integrative view of grammar acquisition by considering both what grammar is and how it functions as part of a communication system and aspects of intake by the learner. An 'intake only' view will lead almost inevitably to what I called an 'ostrich' attitude to grammar.

Yet if a synthetic, rule-based approach to grammar is to be accepted in the modern classroom, progress still needs to be made in defining grammar input in semantic terms. The concepts that have been at the core of my discussions - cognition, psychological validity, situation, communication - have all figured prominently in various theories of grammar in the past decade. Hudson (1984), Langacker (1987), Jackendoff (1983) take a cognitive, concept-based view of grammar; Barwise/Perry (1983), Sperber/Wilson (1986) stress the importance of contextual considerations; Beaugrande's (1985) discourse view of language rejects the sentence as the main unit of analysis; not to mention the overall functional-semantic perspectives of Halliday (1985), Wierzbicka (1988) and others. Clearly, linguistic theories cannot be incorporated directly into syllabus design, but given their common task of accounting for grammar as part of a dynamic communication system the differences between linguistic grammars and

pedagogical grammars should be differences of degree rather than of their theoretical basis. Meanwhile, in the absence of any appropriate theory, the dodo lives on ...

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