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THÈME : L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE LA LANGUE

L'hiver est froid, il a beaucoup de tempêtes et beaucoup de neiges. J'aime l'hiver. J'aime les flocons. les toitures son pleine de neiges.

Dominique, 2^e année



- ARTICLES ■ MÉMOIRES DE DEUXIÈME CYCLE
- TRAVAUX DE PREMIER CYCLE
- COMPTES RENDUS ■ ACTUALITÉS LINGUISTIQUES

HOW MANY LETTERS DOES «GRAMMAR» HAVE? AN APOLOGY FOR THE TEACHING OF GRAMMAR IN SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSES

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1. SEVEN, FOUR, OR SEVENTEEN?

Given that any schoolchild knows that the word «grammar» has seven letters, the reader might well wonder why the question which appears in the title of this article was asked in the first place. The answer is quite simple: the kid-glove approach to grammar adopted by the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (M.E.Q.) in its English as a second language (E.S.L.) curricula and the trepidation the word has given rise to in primary and secondary teaching circles combine to leave the observer wondering if «grammar» were not really a four-letter word in seven-letter garb. Since the mid-eighties¹, the M.E.Q. has explicitly instructed teachers that grammar is not to be used as the starting point of any lesson, that it should only be taught when absolutely necessary, and that it should always be considered of secondary importance in the transmission of a message (*Programme d'études 16-3252*, 21-23). Although the goal of this change in policy was not to eliminate the teaching of grammar, the result has often been just that. Rather than attempt to work grammar into their teaching in conformity with the new guidelines, many teachers have opted for the relatively «safe» policy of teaching no grammar at all. Caught in the middle of the «to teach or not to teach» debate are the students, understandably confused about what grammar is all about. On one hand, they observe that the grammar of their first language has taken on considerable importance in recent years and is now being turned against them on college and university entrance tests as some sort of proof of their ignorance. On the other hand, they see that the grammar of their second language constitutes a subject of little importance, one which is rarely broached in the classroom, let alone discussed or tested.

The saddest aspect of this paradox is that grammar, a subject about which all of us, as native speakers of at least one language, know a good deal more than any grammar book can ever tell us, has come to inspire fear rather than curiosity, loathing rather than pleasure of discovery. In fact, the damage done to the reputation of grammar over the years has been such that those now seeking to reintroduce the subject matter into E.S.L. teaching perceive the word to be so fraught with negative connotation that it can no longer be used in educative circles. E.S.L. specialists such as Hawkins (1984), James and Garrett (1991), and Wright and Bolitho (1993) have come up with a new, more marketable term to describe the study of linguistic phenomena. «Grammar» is slowly mutating into a seventeen-letter word, or rather two words of eight and nine letters respectively: Language Awareness (LA)².

So, the question remains: how many letters does grammar have? Is it, as simple mathematics would lead us to believe, a seven-letter word? Is it, as the fear and loathing it has generated over the past decade have led us to suspect, a four-letter word to be banned from the classroom? Or is it, as those linguists riding on the pendulum swinging back towards form-based language

¹ In the seventies and early eighties Québec used a behaviorist-inspired, grammar-based approach to E.S.L. teaching.

² Language awareness is a somewhat broader field than grammar in that it also takes in some basic notions of textual analysis, but its focus on form and on the meaning of form makes numerous parallels between the two very easy to find. It is hard to see in language awareness anything but grammar by another, less tarnished, name.

teaching contend, a seventeen-letter euphemism needed to sugarcoat a fundamentally unpalatable subject?

2. ANSWERING THE CHARGES AGAINST GRAMMAR

Probably the most serious accusation levelled at the subject in recent years has been that overt grammar instruction is essentially anti-communicative. It is argued that grammar (*la forme* in M.E.Q. terms) plays only a minimal role in the communicative process — the brunt of the communicative burden being borne by lexical content (*le message*) —, and that calling attention to form in language classes impedes communication because it forces learners to sacrifice their message on the altar of grammatical perfection. Symptomatic of this view of grammar is the M.E.Q. catch-phrase, «le message d'abord, la forme ensuite», which is scattered liberally throughout its E.S.L. documents (*Programme d'études 16-3252*, 21) and which is frequently used to discourage any teachers who might wish to revert to a behaviorist-inspired, structuralist approach to grammar instruction.

While the form/message dichotomy advocated by the M.E.Q. may have a certain deterrent effect when it comes to curtailing drill-like grammar teaching, its linguistic validity is highly questionable. In fact, those linguists who do research on the assumption that grammar is consistently a meaningful element of the message cringe in fear of the misunderstanding that such a declaration can spawn. The thinking that led to the decision to separate form and message is fairly easy to reconstitute. Ministry officials and E.S.L. teachers alike have observed that their students are generally able to get their message across, even when their grammar is imperfect. The conclusion they have drawn on the basis of this observation is that lexical content is more important than form in the communication process. For example, the following utterance will probably communicate the speaker's message in spite of its inaccuracies:

1a) I must go bank Monday.

While it is tempting to conclude that grammar is subordinate to lexical content on the basis of this example and the many others that E.S.L. students produce in the classroom, further investigation shows that there is an important consideration which the message – before – form advocates have not taken into consideration. Syntax, an integral part of grammar, is an important factor in our ability to understand 1a, perhaps just as important a factor as lexical content. In other words, it could be argued that the utterance is comprehensible, not because the message is more important than the form, but because the syntax of 1a follows the normal SVO pattern of English affirmatives. In other words, the message in 1a comes across, not in spite of the grammar of the utterance, but thanks to the grammar of the utterance. If one takes the same lexical content and rearranges it so as to violate the SVO order, as in 1b, the resulting utterance is virtually incomprehensible, even to the best-intentioned E.S.L. teacher.

1b) Go must Monday bank I.

Since very few native speakers of French, another SVO language, would ever produce a sentence such as 1b, many teachers and curriculum writers in the province of Québec fail to realize the true importance of grammar in message transmission. Those who teach English to speakers of non-SVO languages such as Turkish, Hungarian or Cree, however, can more readily measure the importance of form in message transmission. Their students' mistakes make them acutely aware of the fact that grammar is part and parcel of the message, not an optional embellishment that can be attended to once learners have got their messages down pat. The separation of form and message practised by the MEQ is therefore an artificial one which serves only to mask the importance of grammar in the communicative process.

At this point, some readers are certain to object that focusing on grammar in the classroom did not work in the past and will not work now, even if one concedes that it is meaningful. Their arguments are likely to take one of the following forms³:

- i) there is no point in teaching grammar forms that students have no trouble transferring from their first language (L1) to their second language (L2) because these points are not likely to be a source of error and will only bore students;
- ii) primary and secondary students are not intellectually capable of handling the abstract thinking that the study of grammar requires;
- iii) grammar is not inherently interesting;
- iv) grammar is fraught with exceptions and is difficult to learn.

In response to the first point, it can be argued that finding out what we know is just as important as finding out what we do not know, as our ability to explore the unfamiliar is heavily influenced by the way in which we comprehend the familiar. Probably the best way to illustrate this contention is by considering the case of mother-tongue grammar and the sad paradox it has created in our school system. Outside of the classroom, the francophone and anglophone students of Québec demonstrate a high degree of oral mastery of their first language. They communicate effortlessly, capture subtle nuances with their words, and generally appear to derive a great deal of pleasure from talking. Furthermore, they are capable of telling non-native speakers whether their utterances are acceptable or not, of determining the level of language of a speaker, and of shifting smoothly from register to register, and even from dialect to dialect, as they address different people. In short, children, even those who have never cracked a grammar book in their lives, are highly proficient users of their first language. In fact, given the rapidity and ease with which they sort out the grammar of their mother tongue, children are unquestionably the best grammarians in the world.

This, however, is not the message children receive in the classroom. There they are told that they do not know anything about grammar and they are forced to submit to tests designed to prove the point. The result is highly predictable: students become convinced not only that they know little about grammar, but that mastering grammar is a task of almost insurmountable difficulty. Never are they told that what they have trouble mastering is not the grammar of their first language, but rather the written conventions that govern it. Never are they told that the grammar of their native tongue should be the most pleasurable of all subjects to study since they already know the right answers and all that remains to be done is to learn how to ask the right questions in order to discover the full extent of what they know. Even the written conventions of language, which are the source of so much grief in our schools, can be reduced to a problem of manageable dimensions when children are led to reflect on the close relationship between meaning and form. In short, using what learners know as a tool to explore what they do not yet know would seem to make good pedagogic sense.

Although the position of E.S.L. teachers is not quite so enviable as that of their mother-tongue counterparts in that their students have not already mastered the subject matter before reflection on it has even begun, they can nonetheless make use of their learners' linguistic reflexes and first language skills. For instance, the shared SVO word order mentioned above can serve as a starting point for reflexion on basic syntax. Students can be encouraged to wonder when and why inversions of SVO occur in English and in French. This can lead nicely into an examination of the interrogative and the negative, and all of the communicative functions in which these forms can be used in everyday conversation. In addition to giving learners

³ The arguments listed have all been put forth by competent, well-intentioned primary and secondary E.S.L. teachers I have talked with about grammar over the past several years.

confidence in their abilities by allowing them to examine what they know before tackling what they don't know, this approach offers two advantages as far as grammar instruction is concerned: students come to view grammar as an integral part of the message they are trying to communicate and they learn to see it as something which is rigorously logical and systematic, as something which is eminently comprehensible.

Another charge levelled against grammar is that it is an abstruse subject which primary and secondary learners, more interested in getting their message across than memorizing rules, would sooner live without. Once again, the charge is easily countered, especially when one draws a line between the subject matter and the manner in which it has been taught over the years. Teachers and curriculum designers tend to view grammar as a static set of rules to be memorized, or, worse still, a collection of frustrating exceptions which, far from confirming the rule, render it almost indigestible. This unfortunate misrepresentation of grammar is further aggravated by the tendency of language teachers to focus on the «exceptions» in the written code, perhaps in an attempt to snuff out any possible fondness for the subject amongst their charges. Grammar, however, is neither arbitrary nor illogical, nor does it consist exclusively of a collection of phenomena which are impossibly complex. It is wonderfully systematic and amazingly coherent. The proof is easy to find: if grammar were arbitrary or horrendously complicated, millions of people around the world would not be able to communicate with the ease they do in English, French, German, Mandarin, Arabic, etc. Moreover, young children would not be able to master the basics of their native tongue by age two or three. Far from being abstruse and accessible only to the educated elite, grammar is the property of all the speakers of a language, including the young and the illiterate. It is not linguists or linguistic academies that determine the course a language will follow, but the collective imagination of all of its native speakers, however well or poorly educated they happen to be. Rather ironically, learning words of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, a task teachers so cheerfully assign to school children within the communicative approach, is far more difficult than learning grammar, a task which teachers hesitate to assign for fear overwhelming their charges, since learners can rarely find underlying systems in the field of vocabulary upon which they can construct generalizations.

The final charge to be addressed here is that of dullness. At the mere mention of the word «grammar», teachers and students alike groan their displeasure. Why? Largely because the subject has been so poorly taught over the years. Any subject which is handled piecemeal, treated as an incomprehensible but necessary evil, and drilled into students in the most inhumane manner possible is bound to be boring. What is even more tragic is that the teaching of grammar, be it of the first language or second language, offers potential beyond compare. Subjects such as mathematics, physics, biology, history, geography give students an opportunity to confront the universe and understand its workings, but grammar goes one better. The study of grammar allows us to retrace the evolution of the human mind, to understand where man stands in his struggle to represent his thoughts. How many children trying to come to terms with the verb system of a first or second language have ever been led to see that verbs, at least in the Indo-European language group, are our solution to the problem of viewing events in time? How many children realize that the nouns they are asked to memorize are all part of our solution to the problem of viewing events in space? How many children are taught that grammar is not a problem, but rather a constantly evolving solution to a problem, a solution which is the very image of of man's progress in representing his thoughts? As the French linguist, Gustave Guillaume (*Principes*, 231-232), so eloquently expresses it:

Une histoire est à écrire qui n'a jusqu'ici jamais été entreprise : c'est celle de la pensée humaine, de sa condition de puissance et de sauvegarde de sa puissance. De cette histoire potentielle de la pensée humaine, les structures de langues sont un miroir fidèle. On la trouve inscrite en traits cachés dans ces structures, qu'il faut apprendre à déchiffrer. ... [L]'histoire structurale du langage, représentée par le défilé historique des états structuraux du langage, est l'unique document

dont nous disposions pour l'étude de l'histoire potentielle de la pensée humaine
— le seul document de cette histoire non écrite.

Why should school children not be allowed to study the history of thought that is grammar whenever possible, in both their first and any subsequent languages? After all, they have already demonstrated their ability to handle the task by learning their first language well enough to become active participants in its evolution.

3. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Thus far it has been argued that grammar is a meaningful, accessible, fascinating subject, and that as such it merits a prominent place in first and second language classrooms. It cannot be put there, however, until such time as teacher trainers, curriculum writers, textbook writers and teachers understand not only its importance, but the opportunity it offers to transform teaching practices. Grammar is an ideal means by which to lead children to reflect on how we think, how we perceive and, most importantly of all, how we imagine. With the exception of philosophy—which is only rarely a part of the primary or secondary curriculum—, no other school subject offers such potential for showing children how far they have come in their learning and, better still, how far they are capable of going. But if grammar is to be taught meaningfully at the primary and secondary levels, it must be taught meaningfully in the university classroom. Those involved in language teacher education must come to see grammar as a comprehensible system of systems and as a rich source of wonder to be explored in the course of a lifetime. Only when this change has come about will we find ourselves with teachers who are capable of helping children discover the beauty and logic of language, and marvel, rather than fear, the new things they learn to see.

The problem in E.S.L. grammar teaching in the province of Québec does not lie in the communicative objectives set down in the curricula for the primary and secondary levels; the teaching and learning of any subject should always be highly communicative pursuits. The problem lies instead in the fact that curriculum writers have forgotten, or perhaps failed to realize, that grammar plays a key role in the communicative process. It gives form to our thoughts and is formed by our thoughts. Without grammar, linguistic communication becomes impossible. Grammar must therefore be demystified and returned to the classroom so that teachers can call attention to it and show their students how to use it to their advantage. It is crucial, however, that grammar be returned to the E.S.L. classroom transformed. Experience has shown us that it cannot be taught adequately by means of behaviorist drills, in the form of a list of exceptions, or by people who fear it. We must train teachers so that they will be able to lead learners to understand the creative power that grammar offers them and to exploit the wide range of expressive possibilities contained in each part of speech. This is not to say that grammar should be the only subject taught in the language classroom—perish the thought!—but that grammar should be legitimized and accepted as a means of helping learners become more proficient in their first language, in their second language, and in their reasoning.

4. ADDING UP THE LETTERS AGAIN

When children do a simple count and conclude that the word grammar has seven letters, we should listen to them. There is a great deal of truth in what they are saying, far more than most people realize. When children arrive at a total of seven, they do so by using the basic reasoning skills that they have acquired in the course of their lives, the same skills that would allow them to explore grammatical systems with passion and determination if we were to give them the opportunity to do so. When children arrive at a total of seven letters in their counting, they do so without undue fuss and worry, oblivious to negative connotations of the word «grammar» and the need many adults feel to seek out a euphemism for it. It simply does not occur to children

that the answer to the question posed in the title of this paper could be anything other than seven because, for them, «grammar» is a word like any other, to be treated like any other. It has seven letters, not four, not seventeen. Educators should make a concerted effort to ensure that things remain this way as these children move through the school system.

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