

Concept-Based Grammar Teaching: An Academic Responds to Azar

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Abstract

This response to Azar (this volume) intends to discuss from an academic's perspective the main points raised in her paper (i.e., grammar-based instruction and its relation to focus on form and error correction) and, to encourage a more concept-based approach to grammar instruction (CBT). A CBT approach to language development argues that the conceptual nature of grammatical forms is best expressed through underlying cognitive schemata. With L2 learners, conceptual development has already taken place and so the L2 morphology may be very opaque conceptually. Thus, introducing schematic depictions for grammatical forms similar to the ones learners developed when learning their L1 can assist the L2 learner to link the underlying concept through deduction to the overt grammatical expression. CBT views language development as a sociocognitive process and this entails the compatibility between cognitive or construction grammars and sociocultural theory. The concept also holds a central position in the synthesis of these perspectives. The response concludes with the proposition that grammar instruction can become more concept-based using a CBT task-based methodology which integrates focus on form, error correction, and the initiation-response-feedback teaching-exchange triad.

Introduction

The intention of this response to Azar is two-fold: (1) to discuss from an academic's perspective the main points raised in her paper and, (2) to encourage a more concept-based approach to grammar instruction.

Azar's first point pertains to the polarization between practitioners and academics. Her suggestion (this volume) to *Do both!* is a pragmatic attempt to synthesize the practitioner's dynamic processes with the theoretical perspective of the academic. Practitioners are by trade experience and action-based. They are hands on in the dynamic language instruction-development process. Academics, by contrast, are

more abstract and distill dynamic processes to variables in empirical research. Although teachers doing action research and researchers developing materials for practitioners represent positive steps towards overcoming the divide, nevertheless, it has been known for some time that there remains an expanse between practitioners and academics in language teaching (see, for example, Ellis, 1997).

Theory involves the development of principles based on the results of research, whereas principles developed through practice derive more from experience. Though theory and practice are of equal importance to teaching and one can serve to inform the other (Ur, 1991), perhaps the bulk of the blame for the split resides more with the academics and their employment of inapplicable scientific research principles to classroom interaction. In large part, this split began with Descartes and his separation of mind and body. It may have even been Aristotle to first notice that the cognitive dominated the social perspective in language and this cognitive dominance has been the norm in Western thought ever since (Engestrom, Miettinen & Punamaki, 1999; Volosinov, 1973, among others).

The separation of the cognitive from the social and the dominance of the cognitive perspective reached its pinnacle in the 20th century with first-generation cognitive-revolution grammars. Asocial grammars, such as Chomskian (1957) transformational-generative grammar, though widely used, have not been appropriate or plausible for first or second-language classroom instruction, resulting in less than effective grammar-based teaching. Its ineffectiveness also possibly stems from the fact that these grammars were in large part incomprehensible to many practitioners, which in turn created a lack of confidence when teaching grammar, possibly also inadvertently giving rise to theories based on zero grammar input.

The incomprehensible complexity of some academics presents another troublesome aspect to language instruction. Many academic terms, such as "intersubjectivity," are problematic to practitioners, as if the academic were, to use Azar's phrase, *speaking in tongues*. Indeed, the less academics are understood by practitioners and the more academics make practitioners feel as though they are not participants in the academic discourse community the more an indication it may be of how good the academic is at another Azar phrase, *academese*. To be sure, have not most of us, whether practitioner or academic, endured the experience of sitting in a presentation by an applied linguist while failing to understand a single word?

Rather than alienate, then, academics should make their literature more accessible to practitioners struggling with the terminology because intersubjectivity simply means the development of a shared understanding or focus between a speaker and a listener (Rommetveit, 1992). Perhaps this alienation also stems from asocial exclusionist research procedures. Yet, as Lave & Wenger (1991) pointed out some time ago, if research procedures were changed to include the social, experience and process-based methods of practitioners and were indifferent to external correlations between variables, (i.e., if they were no longer cognitive dominant), then we might have a chance of dissolving the dichotomy between and practitioner and academic, of creating a better understanding between practice and theory, and, more importantly, of developing an abstract-based approach to grammar teaching that could be practically applied to the classroom.

As a confirmed practitioner, Azar might not be comfortable with the term *abstract*.

Possibly she would suggest *concept* as an alternative, since she emphasizes the concept's importance in grammar-based teaching (GBT). Azar (this volume) provides an interesting introduction to the function of the concept in grammar teaching, especially how it developed antithetically from the Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) and its position regarding focus on form (FonF; Doughty & Williams, 1998). Indeed, a reader of her piece might even start to take her for a bit of an academic. As the title of this present piece suggests, however, it may also be the case that the directions of grammar teaching could develop even further, that is, from GBT to *concept-based* grammar teaching (CBT).

It is worth noting here, as Azar did in her TESOL 2007 plenary, that the focus on meaning introduced by communicative language teaching (CLT) was welcomed by practitioners, but at the same time GBT (shunned by the reigning academics of the time) was not simultaneously rejected--as can be witnessed by the popularity of GBT materials during this period. And this is as it should be because, as Azar additionally points out (this volume), grammar and meaning should not be viewed as distinct. Grammar in large part represents the condensation of meaning (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca, 1994). Meaning becomes condensed through repeated usage and thus when practitioners focus on grammar they have not abandoned meaning. It is not difficult to find examples of grammar condensation. For example, contractions condense meaning. The negative *not* becomes *n't*, and, as we will see, this condensation is also important to the view that, rather than overgeneralize, learners need to constrain their use of grammar. Within the CLT literature, perhaps the best term that illustrates the continuum between meaning and grammar is *lexicogrammatical* (Halliday, 1994).

We are also recently seeing in L2 teaching meaning being presented from a more second-generation cognitive revolution perspective. *Meaning* has always been a somewhat vague or undefined term in CLT. Apart from a pragmatics' attempt to account for meaning with implicature, non-literal meanings have not been accounted for or not even discussed (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Indeed, many of these more social elements of language have been reduced by the dominance of the cognitive perspective to some minor pragmatic role. With the recent acknowledgment that metaphor and figurative language are ubiquitous in discourse (Littlemore & Low, 2006; Cameron, 2003), it is now becoming easier to redefine or enhance exactly what is meant by meaning. Moreover, practitioners and academics alike can benefit from this better understanding of the importance of metaphor and metonymy's meaning-making role in language and culture (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Additionally, understanding its relationship to grammar can also improve the effectiveness of GBT (Hill, 2006a; Holme, 2004). Indeed, focusing solely on GBT in CLT presents the danger of developing a somewhat grammar-skewed communicative competence in the learner.

Grammar, Concepts and Schemata

A CBT approach to language development argues that the conceptual nature of grammatical forms is best expressed through underlying cognitive schemata. Schemata are the underlying organizational pattern, structure or conceptual framework of a language. For example, subject-verb-object (SVO) reflects the schematization of a joint-attention frame between the speaker, the hearer and an

object (Tomasello, 2003). Tense-aspect is also a temporal schematic representation of spatial relations. Tense-aspect is an excellent example of the conceptual nature of language, because we still do not have a clear understanding of the existence of time, yet our conception of it and its expression through tense-aspect are fundamental to grammar.

With L1 learners, resultative aspect is first to emerge because of the immediacy of events (e.g., *the glass has broken*) and then children develop the idea that past tense is used to express events no longer of current relevance. Thus, there is a clear link here between conceptual development and language use. With L2 learners, on the other hand, it is much different. Conceptual development has already taken place and so the L2 morphology used to express a temporal relation may be very opaque conceptually. There may also be conflicts of a cultural nature in conceptual development. This is why introducing schematic depictions for grammatical forms similar to the ones learners developed when learning their L1 (e.g., *the broken glass*) can be helpful to the L2 learner in order to link the L2 morphology to their existing L1 conceptual system or re-conceive the schema to the L2 and then make the link. In this way, grammatical notions such as *subject* or *noun* develop from the repeated use of utterances and the invariance in each word's position in the utterances.

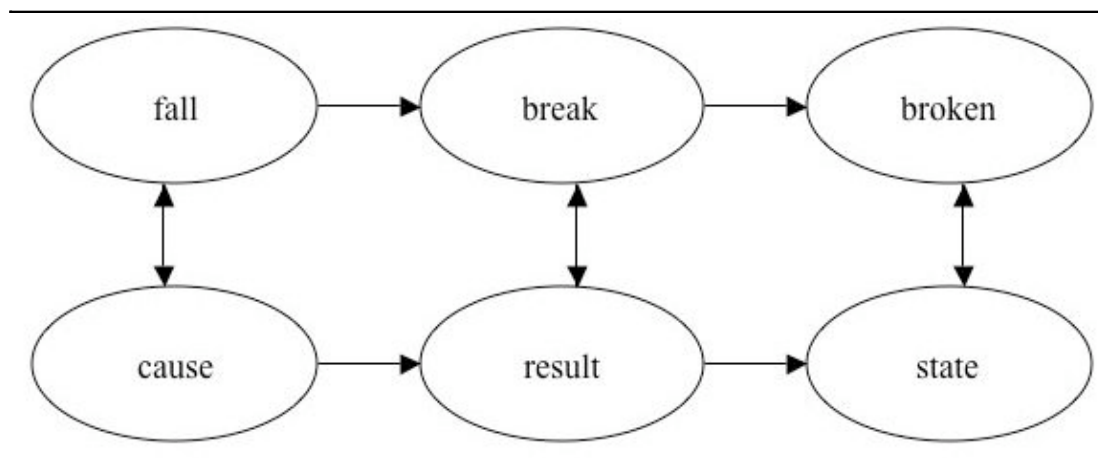


Figure 1. Schematic Representation of Resultative Aspect.

Azar (this volume) rightly shuns rules from grammar teaching, while at the same time stresses a conceptual explanation to underlie the particular grammatical form. Arbitrariness of rules is not possible because speakers have the conceptual freedom to construe a given situation in many different ways according to their addressee and consequently it cannot be predicted in absolute terms or with rules which particular usage might be chosen and conventionalized (Langacker, 1987; Larsen-Freeman, 2002). In short, a schematic representation for a grammatical construal developed through usage offers a much better alternative to rules, especially with CBT. In this way, implicit thought processes are made explicit, thereby resolving the implicit vs. explicit instruction dichotomy.

Concept-Based Teaching and FonF

Azar (this volume) sees the issue facing practitioners today as being whether (1) to teach grammar separately but integrated with CLT as one component out of many in a well-balanced program or (2) to integrate grammar into a content and/or task-focused approach, either incidentally as opportunities arise or by a predetermined grammar syllabus. Azar seems to be addressing how to best incorporate into GBT the two types of FonF: proactive (i.e., taught) and reactive (i.e., incidental). Along these lines, a CBT approach also requires the need for a reanalysis of CLT into more concept-based terms, which involves, rather than structuring a syllabus on grammatical complexity alone, structuring it on the complexity of the underlying thought processes involved when choosing to use a particular grammatical form.

The problem with FonF from a CBT perspective is that it only focuses on morphological errors made by learners rather than on the underlying conceptual processes involved in choosing to use that particular morphology. Many practitioners may have had the experience where a student is aware and can notice their error in morphology but still cannot understand why they made the wrong morphological choice. In these cases, learners may be seeking a conceptual explanation for the erroneous path in reasoning that their thought deductive processes pursued and consequently led them to apply the incorrect morphology. Indeed, this underscores the fact that errors themselves are conceptual, and, again, in such cases, a schematic representation of the deictic, spatiotemporal or joint-attention frame for the grammatical form could assist the learner to initiate correct thought processes and link the underlying concept to the correct morphology. Instruction based on conceptual development may prove to better parallel learners' particular developmental sequences, because an additional problem with the reactive form of FonF is that it is rare for an entire class to be focused on the same form.

Error Correction

Azar (this volume) comments that mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning and adds corrective feedback is a natural and accepted part of a grammar-based class. In the form of recasts, error correction involves a very complex interaction of factors between participants in the classroom. Recasts are a restatement of all or part of the learner's utterance that reformulates the utterance, while maintaining the semantic content (Ohta, 2001). Though recasts are complex in themselves, they are also one of many complex sequences occurring in the classroom. In order to better understand the effectiveness of the uptake of recasts, rather than study them in isolation, perhaps they need to be studied and disambiguated from the other complex instructional sequences occurring in the classroom, for example, the initiation-response-feedback teaching exchange (IRF).

If the learner is under the impression that a recast is an initiation from an IRF sequence, then she may exhibit response rather than uptake. Furthermore, if uptake is exhibited, there is also the potential for the learner to *overgeneralize* the form to inappropriate contexts (as opposed to generalizing). If students were previously given a schematic or conceptual explanation for the grammatical form, rather than overgeneralize they may have more of an awareness to *constrain* their conception of use to the appropriate context specified in the recast. As was previously mentioned, this constraint of use is based on deduction and is similar to the constraint found

when grammatical forms become condensed through grammaticalization processes (e.g., *not* to *n't*). The current lack of a conceptual explanation in present grammar instruction may be causing many learners to apply grammatical forms in too many contexts. The typical IRF triad may actually encourage the learner to do so--especially when the focus is on the morphology rather than the underlying schema. In sum, in order to constrain the possibility of learners overgeneralizing as a result of instruction, recasts could be better utilized in this instance to link the conceptual explanation of the form to its correct context.

Sociocognitive Grammar Teaching

Along with the cognitive skills Azar mentioned, sociocultural skills also merit mentioning. If cognitive or conceptual factors are based on deictic and spatiotemporal factors, sociocultural factors focus more on the activity that takes place within these contextual frames and this joint activity between participants also plays a fundamental role in the use, as well as emergence and submergence, of grammatical forms. As was pointed out at the beginning of this piece, these two approaches have tended to be studied separately but more recently research is being done into their assimilation, hence, the term, *sociocognitive* (Hill, 2006b; Atkinson, 2002).

Indeed, cognitive and sociocultural factors (like meaning and grammar or practice and theory) are best not viewed as distinct but as two ends of a continuum. After doing a meta-analysis of most major grammars [i.e., Transformational (Chomsky, 1965), Lexical Functional (Bresnan & Kaplan, 1982; Bresnan, 2001), Descriptive (Quirk et al., 1985; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002), Systemic-Functional (Halliday, 1994), Corpus-based (Biber et al., 1999), Cognitive (Langacker, 1987; 1991), Role and Reference (Van Valin, 1993) and Radical Construction (Croft, 2001)], the particular sociocognitive approach advocated by CBT is a combination of cognitive and construction grammars (Langacker, 1987; Croft, 2001; Goldberg, 2005) with sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Sociocultural theory developed from the work of the Russian methodologist Vygotsky (1986, 1978) and the concept was central to his theory of language development. In fact, he held that grammar emerged from the developmental stages between complex and conceptual thought (Robbins 2001), and the main premise of cognitive/construction grammars is that grammar represents the external manifestation of these internal conceptual processes. Thus, we see the concept is central to both approaches, revealing how the concept can unify them as well as how their compatibility has important implications for CBT.

Once the shift to a more sociocognitive oriented perspective of grammar has taken place, we begin to view it more as the interweaving of participants' schemata as well as the expression of their intentions in a particular context. Grammar is then seen as a dialogic co-construction (Celce-Murcia, 2002), revealing that CBT is also fundamentally social in practice. Then the perspective shifts from the view that grammar is the starting point of the development process to also thinking of it as the endpoint.

Conclusion

To sum up, this response piece discussed from an academic's perspective some of the main issues in Azar's GBT approach and proposed grammar instruction should become more concept-based along the following lines: (1) a conceptual explanation for a grammatical form can help to develop cognitive schemata in the learner, (2) a concept-based grammar explanation may assist in making any error in a learner's deductive thought processes more apparent to the practitioner, (3) if the learner overgeneralizes a form as a result of instruction, the practitioner may use error correction in the form of a recast to highlight the correct context of usage for the form (thereby assisting the learner to constrain their conception), and, (4) the practitioner could then use reactive FonF to link the morphology to the correct concept and context (thereby removing its conceptual opacity).

All four of these proposals could be the basis of a task-based CBT methodology. These tasks could be designed to expect conceptual overgeneralization from the introduction of the form and have built-in constraint techniques. They could also be designed with the complex interaction of IRF, error correction, and FonF in mind. The tasks should also attempt to link schemata with context as well as cognitive with social processes. Needless to say, having pushed the boundaries of CBT as far as this current piece has, before any concrete conclusions can be drawn, much further investigation needs to be conducted into the relationship between CBT and the various interactional sequences occurring in the classroom. If more accurate output were to occur, however, the next concept in the developmental process (e.g., from aspect to tense) could then be explained schematically, again highlighting the point that concepts, too, are not isolated, but also part of the learner's complex developmental continuum.

It goes without saying that engaging in major research while teaching is not a realistic option for most already overworked practitioners. Thus, the compromise between academics and practitioners may have to come more from the former and their willingness to participate "hands on" by situating theory in practice. Finally, whether your preference is GBT or CBT, both place the concept at the center of their approaches, which suggests that we will be seeing more concept-based grammar-teaching materials in the future.

About the Author

Kent Hill has been teaching English to university students in Tokyo, Japan for many years. When not teaching, he enjoys developing his sociocognitive concept-based approach to grammar instruction. He began discussing grammatical issues with Betty Azar a few years ago when pursuing his doctoral degree.

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