

# Grammar

## The origins of grammar in the verbalization of experience

Why is there grammar? The verbalization of experience can provide an explanatory model of the function of grammatical categories and constructions. Chafe's model of verbalization provides a model of how the unanalyzed, unique whole of experience is broken up into parts that are categorized into types, that is, the lexical roots of an utterance. We add further processes to Chafe's model, because the speaker also must convert the types represented by the lexical roots back to the particulars of the experience, and put the parts back together into the original whole. These additional processes express the aspects of experience that become grammaticalized. A functional classification of grammatical categories and structures in terms of their role in verbalization is outlined.

(Croft, 2007)

With the rise of communicative methodology in the late 1970s, the role of grammar instruction in second language learning was downplayed, and it was even suggested that teaching grammar was not only unhelpful but might actually be detrimental. However, recent research has demonstrated the need for formal instruction for learners to attain high levels of accuracy. This has led to a resurgence of grammar teaching, and its role in second language acquisition has become the focus of much current investigation. In this chapter we briefly review the major developments in the research on the teaching of grammar over the past few decades. This review addresses two main issues: (1) whether grammar teaching makes any difference to language learning; and (2) what kinds of grammar teaching have been suggested to facilitate second language learning. To this end, the chapter examines research on the different ways in which formal instruction can be integrated with communicative activities. They come to the conclusion that current research clearly indicates that grammar feedback is

necessary in order for language learners to attain high levels of proficiency in the target language. They report that it is now suggested that among the essential conditions for acquisition of grammatical forms are (1) learner noticing and continued awareness of target forms, (2) repeated meaning-focused exposure to input containing them, and (3) opportunities for output and practice. It is also recognized that, because the acquisition of grammar is affected by internal processing constraints, spontaneous and accurate production cannot be instantaneous but will naturally require time as learners move toward mastery.

(Nassaji & Fotos, 2004)

### **Can late L2 learners acquire new grammatical features? Evidence from ERPs and eye-tracking**

The authors report a series of ERP and eye-tracking experiments investigating, (a) whether English–French learners can process grammatical gender online, (b) whether cross-linguistic similarities influence this ability, and (c) whether the syntactic distance between elements affects agreement processing. To address these questions the authors visually presented sentences which were either grammatically correct or contained noun–adjective gender agreement violations. In response to violations between the noun and a post-posed adjective (the canonical structure in French), both groups revealed a P600 effect. In contrast, violations between the noun and a pre-posed adjective (a less frequent order) triggered a P600 in French speakers but an N400 in L2 learners (implying that learners have not yet fully acquired native-like processing for pre-posed adjectives). Violations between the noun and the predicative adjective showed different effects for the native (P600) and non-native (no effect) groups with ERPs, but a similar pattern with eye-tracking. Overall, these results suggest that late L2 learners can acquire and process new features.

(Foucart & Frenck-Mestre, 2012)

Now, this comes as a surprise – concrete words are better remembered than abstract ones:

### **Retrieval of concrete words involves more contextual information than abstract words: Multiple components for the concreteness effect**

The current study used the directed forgetting paradigm in implicit and explicit memory to investigate the concreteness effect. Event-related potentials (ERPs) were recorded to explore the neural basis of this phenomenon. The behavioral results showed a clear concreteness effect in both implicit and explicit memory tests; participants responded significantly faster to concrete words than to abstract words. The ERP results revealed a concreteness effect (N400) in both the encoding and retrieval phases. In addition, behavioral and ERP results showed an interaction between word concreteness and memory instruction (to-be-forgotten vs. to-be-remembered) in the late epoch of the explicit retrieval phase, revealing a significant concreteness effect only under the to-be-remembered instruction condition. This concreteness effect was realized as an increased P600-like component in response to concrete words relative to abstract words, likely reflecting retrieval of contextual details. The time course of the concreteness effect suggests advantages of concrete words over abstract words due to greater contextual information.

(Xin Xiao, Di Zhao, Qin Zhang, & Guo, 2012)

### **The past and future of the past tense**

What is the interaction between storage and computation in language processing? What is the psychological status of grammatical rules? What are the relative strengths of connectionist and symbolic models of cognition? How are the components of language implemented in the brain? The English past tense has served as an arena for debates on these issues. We defend the theory that irregular past-tense forms are stored

in the lexicon, a division of declarative memory, whereas regular forms can be computed by a concatenation rule, which requires the procedural system. Irregulars have the psychological, linguistic and neuropsychological signatures of lexical memory, whereas regulars often have the signatures of grammatical processing. Furthermore, because regular inflection is rule-driven, speakers can apply it whenever memory fails.

(Pinker & Ullman, 2002)

“There are at present two general views on implementing second/foreign language instruction. First, we can start from meaning and communication, assuming that grammar will ‘take care of itself’ with only a little help from the teacher. Second, we can start from grammar, assuming that communicative ability will follow from subsequent practice. The present article examines the key arguments for the meaning-first approach and two specific proposals for its implementation. It is then argued that such an approach is not appropriate for adult foreign language instruction, in which grammar should be taught and practised systematically from the initial stages of the process.”  
(Scheffler, 2011)

L1 differences and L2 similarities: teaching verb tenses in English

In making decisions regarding the focus for grammar teaching, ESL instructors may take into consideration errors that appear to result from the influence of their students’ first language(s) (L1). There is also evidence from language acquisition research suggesting that for some grammatical features, learners of different L1 backgrounds may face similar types of challenges. This article examines the issues of L1 influence and common developmental patterns in the domain of verb tense and aspect. The first part of the article provides an overview of some of the tense aspect learning challenges faced by learners in general. The second summarizes findings from a study that compared the acquisition of the simple past in English by Japanese and

French-speaking learners. In the final section, teaching suggestions, based on the insights gained from acquisition research, are offered. The different activities presented all focus students' attention on the contextual factors which motivate choices about the most appropriate tense-aspect forms for conveying intended meanings.

(Collins, 2007)

### **Corpora and grammar—how much 'Well, it depends' can we take?**

The author reflects on Standard English as the language used in English Language Teaching. He states that usually, if language conforms to the Standard English, then it is correct. It offers an explanation to the correct usage of the phrase "I says" according to the British National Corpus, and the "Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English." The author suggests that the phrase "I says to my mother" is not grammatically incorrect.

(Rühlemann, 2008)

### **Perspectives on spoken grammar.**

English language teachers' opinions on the pedagogic relevance of spoken grammar are beginning to be reported, yet the voices of teachers in East Asia are rarely heard. In this article, the views of teachers from China and Singapore expressed in an online discussion are compared. The discussion, which was part of a taught postgraduate course, focused on the usefulness of British spoken grammar norms and the potential value of spoken grammar knowledge for language learners. There is a broad consensus of opinion

about its importance for raising learners' language awareness, but Chinese and Singaporean teachers generally had different attitudes to native speaker norms, while opinions on some pedagogical issues vary more at the individual level. The similarities and differences are attributed to the teachers' sociolinguistic concerns, understanding of learner needs, and beliefs about grammar that are influenced by the written language. The implications of these teacher perspectives for teacher education are highlighted.

(Goh, 2009)

### **Student views on learning grammar with web- and book-based materials**

This paper reports on a study which examined students' attitudes to learning grammar in autonomous contexts and their preferences for the learning materials with which to do so. In all, 38 students were surveyed and 13 of these then spent some time working in a language resource centre (LRC) with web- and paper based materials. Students then completed a series of questionnaires concerning what they liked and disliked about the two types of materials. Four participants were then interviewed in more detail about their responses. The data suggest that despite the well-documented advantages of the tutorial role of computers and the notion of the 'digital native', participants generally preferred working with paper based materials. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of this for materials that LRCs stock and for the changing role of computers in self-study contexts.

(Jarvis & Szymczyk, 2010)

## **Explicit grammar rules and L2 acquisition**

This article reports an empirical study that examines to what extent learners can identify and understand the grammatical structures they produce when they speak spontaneously. In the study, 20 upper-intermediate Polish learners of English were interviewed in English by the researchers. The structures used accurately by each learner were isolated and each of the participants was then administered a separate test. The task in the test was first to identify correct sentences and then to provide relevant grammar rules. The results show that in most cases, the learners were able to identify and explain the grammar rules that accounted for their own accurate L2 performance. In terms of second language acquisition (SLA) theory, this means that there were few grammatical structures or categories that the learners knew only implicitly. For teachers, the study indicates that explicit grammar rules can, in an indirect way, contribute to SLA.

(Scheffler & Cinciała, 2011)

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