GRAMMAR, NOTIONS, FUNCTIONS, DISCOURSE: SOME PERSPECTIVES

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The title of this article is rather a monster. The fairest thing I can do is to begin with something like a conclusion so that you can stop here if you think it is nonsense:

"Language and Language behaviour (learning and use of languages) are immensely complex and at present far beyond our full understanding; no single insight (linguistic, psychological, sociological or whatever) can answer all the prayers of language teachers or learners; the firmest ground in the field is still probably sentence grammar and vocabulary."

That is not very original -- a plea for eclecticism with tradition in the foundations rather than superstructure, a plea against building new methodologies (or appearing to) on the soft ground of new fashions. But it seems necessary to remind ourselves again and again that if the problem is complex, the solution is likely to be so, too. It seems difficult for us to resist the temptation to convert useful insights into the New Right Way to Teach Foreign Languages, instead of using them to adjust and add to what we already do.

Back to the title. This article will examine the terms "notions", "functions" and "discourse" (which flourish in current methodological discussion) and and attempt to assess the convenience of their supplanting sentence grammar as the corner stone of foreign language teaching methodology; I do not for one moment doubt the convenience of their adjusting and adding to what we have been doing in sentence grammar based methodology. Let us first try to establish, even if rather superficially, what is meant by the terms, including good old "grammar" itself.

Grammar is what countless generations of linguists (back to grammarians and Greek philosophers) have seen underlying formally acceptable utterances: "Peter was the winner" is grammatically correct in standard English, and "Peter were winner" is not. Exactly how linguists have described what they have seen has varied, and the variation has caused some controversy. Grammar can be seen as a system of rules or as an inventory of structures; either way "Peter were winner" would be considered ungrammatical for the same reasons as "Susan were loser" or "My older brother were organizer" are ungrammatical. Likewise, "Peter didn't lose" and "Susan didn't win" would be seen as being grammatically similar to "My younger brother did not go out." It is usual, also, to think in terms of grammar - and - usage, not just of formal grammar alone: the usages of the Present Progressive and of the Present Simple in questions like "What are you doing?" and "What do you do?" are always quite distinct, whereas in Spanish "¿Qué haces?" (which can translate "What do you do?") and "¿Qué estás haciendo?" (which can translate "What are you doing?") can have the same usage.

Most recent E.F.L. methodology has been grammatical, with structure and usage analysis surfacing in textbooks and classrooms as model sentences and drilling. At its best, such methodology has gone far beyond structure and usage drilling, and has stressed the importance of extended listening, reading and writing, communicative speaking in role-play and discussion, and student - controlled work in groups, pairs and individually.

Notions are the conceptual content of utterances: who does what, when, to whom, where, why, etc. The notions in one utterance can usually be expressed in other grammatically distinct utterances: "Peter was the winner" can be considered notionally identical to "Peter won" or "Peter came in first" or "The first in was Peter "or even, in a newspaper headline, "Peter Wins." (All could be analyzed in terms of three notions: who, Peter; what, winning; when, past). Let us mention here just one possible implication for foreign language teaching. We have not equipped learners fully in a notional area (especially for comprehension of natural language) by showing them a single form of expression: the learner of Spanish who has mastered the conditional construction "Si hubiera... habría...." may be completely thrown by "De haber sabido, no voy" (instead of "Si yo hubiera estado en tu lugar, le habría dicho la verdad"). Of course, alternatives often involve differences in style.

Functions (or "communicative functions") are the intended effects of utterances. "Peter won might be spoken in order to give information (A. "I wonder what happended in the go-cart race." B. "Peter won."), or in order to contradict (A. "I'm glad Susan won." B. "Peter won.") An utterance may be intended as a statement, a request, an invitation, a suggestion, a command, etc. An invitation to a drink may be performed with a variety of alternative language forms and constructions: "A drink?" "Have a drink". "What'll it be?" "Would you like a drink?"and so on. The second alternative is a grammatical imperative but functions communicatively as an invitation not a command. One implication for foreign language teaching is again that a learner is not fully equipped (especially for comprehension of natural language) with a single way to perform a communicative function. This point, for notions and functions, was taken some time ago in certain teaching and testing materials (for example, in the Cambridge Examinations); a common exercise type is to complete sentences so that they have the same meaning as another sentence:

1. Why don't you ask the accountant?
   If .....
   (Possible answer: If I were you, I'd ask the accountant.)

2. He isn't as tall as his brother.
   His brother.....
   (Possible answer: His brother is taller than he is.)

However, this implication (the alternative forms of expression for given notions or the performance of functions) has not been particularly prominent in the arguments of those who propose a new approach to foreign language teaching, and it can only be safely exploited from the intermediate level on. Proponents of a notional - functional approach argue principally that we could prepare learners better for real language use by teaching them syste-

matically how to express the most essential notions and perform the most essential functions rather than by trying to teach them the whole of English grammar, structure by structure, and hoping they will discover for themselves how the mechanics of the language come alive in real communicative situations.

Discourse means stretches of natural language (texts in newspapers, magazines and books, conversations, talks, and so on). Both structural and notional - functional teachers tend to regard the foreign language syllabus as an inventory of key units (structures per se or ways of expressing notions and performing functions) which can be presented and drilled in isolation or in very rudimentary contexts. However, the learner's real use of the foreign language is unlikely to involve producing or understanding more than two conditional sentences or invitations in row, but rather will involve participating in conversations, writing and reading letters, reading books, and so on. The learner needs to know, therefore, the devices, logical, linguistic and paralinguistic, that hold discourse together. Many current teaching materials, especially for E.S.P., concentrate on teaching these devices.

So far the intention has been to establish a basis for further discussion, which will involve reference to influential writing on notions and functions and discourse, as well as to personal teaching experience. To some extent this further discussion will take place around a history of recent E.F.L. teaching.

In the early 60's British E.F.L. teaching seemed to an innocent (not to say ignorant) newcomer like me to stand firmly on a single, simple axiom: "Teach the language, not about the language!" The focus was on grammar, but with a total ban on explicit explanation or rule-giving. Grammar was presented through model sentences and practised through vast quantities of choral and individual repetition and pattern drilling. However, all the models should be "meaningful", that is to say set in a situation, so that a student's utterance could be not true as well as not grammatical. In this way the learners should grasp, it was hoped, not only how a structure was formed but also how to use it in real situations. This was (and is) the Structural - Situational Method (a grammar-and usage method). Many points of dogma have been modified with time (for example, the total ban on grammar rules and on the use of the learners' native language), but the SSM marches on, although it is no longer the band-wagon to jump on. SSM teachers and materials writers have racked their brains for more than two decades, and still do so, for ingenious ideas to situationalize grammatical patterns. The Present Progressive (in its "happening-now" usage) is considered unnatural in statements describing events visible to both participants in a dialogue, so a colleague of mine came up with the idea of establishing a situation in which two Martians Zig and Zag, are looking at Earth but with only one telescope between them; the students role-play like this:

Zig (with the telescope): On!
Zag: What can you see?
Zig: The Queen of England.
Zag: What's she doing?
Zig: She's drinking tea with whisky

Ingenious, and fantastic (hardly the "real world"), but many students appear to have enjoyed and learnt from this (children also seem to learn for the real world through fantasy situations). And, of course, most situations in SSM materials attempt to be realistic.

Before leaving the SSM, I would like to comment on a generally accepted judgement on usage: "the Present Progressive is not used to describe events visibly to both participants in a dialogue" (hence the Martians). Have I had an unusually wretched life? Time and again I find myself in cinemas with a pair of film - goers, seated usually just behind me, who carry on like this:

A: Oo, look! Cary Grant's searching in her handbag.
B: Yes! Oo! Oo! He's putting the car keys in his pocket.

Would it do any good to turn round and say?:

"Excuse me. I'm an English teacher and I think you ought to know that you're using the Present Progressive incorrectly."
Probably not. Anyway, the judgement on the usage of the Present Progressive is wrong, but the decision to avoid practice of that usage is probably right, for two reasons: firstly because it would not be an objective of English teachers to train students to be irritating in the cinema, and secondly because, if students want to be irritating in the cinema and they are proficient in the Present Progressive, they will not need to be taught how to use it irritatingly. I hope this has been a little more than a frivolous digression, and has pointed out the importance of common sense in E.F.L., as in life in general; and common sense is sadly lacking when we set out to teach students how to threaten, accuse, and so on, as in some notional - functional materials.

Let us move forward to the 70's. Doubts began to be cast on the adequacy of grammar - and - usage approaches in E.F.L. teaching (the SSM, for example). What follows is a quote from David Wilkins, one of the early leaders of notional - functional theory in language teaching.

" - - - - - language learning is not complete when one is proficient in producing grammatical forms and has assimilated the relations which they express. What we describe as the grammatical" function of a sentence is not necessarily the same as its "utterance" function..... An imperative form of a verb is used, we believe, for giving orders and in language teaching we are usually satisfied that once the imperative has been learnt, the pupil knows how orders should be given and also how the imperative is used in the language. But in the first place imperatives are used for many other purposes:

Find a seat and I'll get drinks. (suggestion)
Do that and I'll knock your teeth in. (threat)
Connect the hose to the water supply. (instruction)
Turn left at the traffic lights and
take the third turning on the left. (direction)
Watch your glass. (warning)
Have a drink. (invitation)

- - - - - - - Conversely, it is equally possible to produce utterances to containing no imperative forms, but which still have the effect of imposing the will of the speaker on the hearer:

> If you don't shut the window, you'll get a good hiding.
> I insist that you do it .
> You pay the bill.
> You're not going out in that dress.
> My husband will carry your bag for you.
> ("Linguistics in Language Teaching", Arnold, 1972)

Here Wilkins classifies "Do that and I'll knock your teeth in" as a threat and "If you don't shut the window, you'll get a good hiding" as an order. Surely they are either both threats or both orders. This exemplifies one of the principle problems of using a notional-functional inventory as the basis of a syllabus (rather than as a supplement to a structure-and-usage syllabus): whereas there is a high degree of agreement about what are the basic structures of English and in what order they may best be taught, there is no such agreement about notions and functions. In "The Threshold Level for Modern Language Learning in Schools" (Longman, 1976), Dr. J.A. van Ek provides quite lengthy inventories of language functions and notions. He makes a fairly sensible classification and selection, which cannot be said of many functional text-books; two early intermediate books I examined set out to teach students how to perform the functions of expressing "polite distaste", "modesty", "threats", "accusations" and "complaints" (models for threatening are "I'll break your neck!" "I'm going to beat the living daylights out of main you! and "Watch it or I'll break your arm off'"). The main question here is not "Should we be trying to teach students to behave tongues in their cheeks?, but "Do we need to?" Any early intermediate student with a reasonable command of grammar, usage and vocabulary should be able to recognize the average threat or complaint; any student with a reasonable command of the Simple Present and with the appropriate vocabulary should be able to handle a large number of Dr. van Ek's functions: expressing agreement and disagreement (I agree/don't agree) inquiring about agreement or disagreement (Do you agree?) denying something (I don't smoke Raleigh!); stating whether one knows or does not know something or someone (I know/don't know.....); etc. etc. So why don't we just teach the Simple Present and supplement insights into usage with further insights into functions? (for let me recognize that the Spanish "No estoy de acuerdo" will not lead the Mexican learner of English direct to "I don't agree") Admittedly there may be a number of functions that learners may wish or need to perform before the appropriate language forms and structures are introduced in a strictly selected and graded structural syllabus, but these can be accommodated without totally substituting this:

> a) Structures/vocabulary/usage ----→ notions and communicative functions.
> With this:
> b) Notions and communicative functions ---→ structures/vocabulary

Much of the transfer indicated by the arrow in (a) does not need to be "taught"; a learner does not need to be told that "I don't know" expresses "not knowing", that "I don't believe you" expresses "disbelief", that "I like music" expresses "liking", that "Have a drink" is an "invitation", that "I

think it's easy" is an "opinion", that "I didn't do it" is a "denial", if that learner has grasped the meaning and usage of the structures and vocabulary and also has normal understanding of the universals in human communication. We do not teach notions and functions; people invite, deny, and give opinions in their native language, whether it be Spanish, English, Chinese or Tagalog. What we teach is the language forms and structures used in the new language to express universal notions and perform universal functions. The problems in the model shown in (b) above are more on the right of the arrow than on the left: a learner who commands the Present Progressive and the verb"think" may make a good attempt at expressing a "tentative plan", in fact actually performing the communicative function adequately but with a grammar error ("I'm thinking to go to France next year".) Some notional-functional theoreticians and materials writers seem to think we have to teach the notions and functions themselves rather than the language:

> "In Unit 6 you learnt that directions tell us how to go from one place (A) to another (B)".
>
> ("Functional English")

I hope this was just a slip of the pen, and what was really intended was "In Unit 6 you learnt how to give directions in English", as it stands, the above sentence's function is "patronizing" (or would it be "insulting people's intelligence?").

At its best, teaching based on a notional-functional syllabus may be highly successful; for one thing, new approaches tend to benefit from the initial enthusiasm they arouse. However, I still believe that a structure-and-usage syllabus can generate more communication, especially when (as is so often the case)this principally involves the exchange of information (rather than of a complaint , a threat, an apology, an invitation, directions - a bizarre sequence, which the structure - and - usage learner could probably handle adequately, anyway, if he had the right personality). Nevertheless I do believe notions and functions should play an important role in a course: language forms and structures required for certain notions or functions can be introduced before they are to occur in the main syllabus (for example, "Can you repeat/write that, please?" is very useful early on); utterances generated by a structure in the main syllabus can be exploited functionally (with the teaching of the Simple Present "I agree /don't agree" can be taught and incorporated into elementary discussion work; with the 2nd type conditional "If I were you..." can be incorporated into advice-giving role-play; and so on); and finally, as a course develops, the learners can be made more aware of the alternative language forms and structures for the same notion or function ("I agree/I think so, too. /Quite right". or "Why don't you....?/ If I were you..../ You should.....").

At the TESOL Convention in Mexico City in 1978 Henry Widdowson, participating in a plenary session in which several speakers expressed their views on notional syllabuses, was far less optimistic than his fellow speakers. The point he made was that natural linguistic communication virtually always involves discourse, and in this respect notional syllabuses are no great advance on structural syllabuses: both present and drill language items (whether they be structures per se or as exponents of notions and functions) in isolation or in very rudimentary and ritualized discourse contexts. Our language teaching should come to grips with discourse right from the beginning

To print he says:

> ".....although we can consider usage by restricting our attention to sentences, the consideration of use requires us to go beyond the sentence and to look at larger stretches of language. Normal linguistic behaviour does not consist in the production of separate sentences but in the use of sentences in the creation of discourse".
>
> ("Teaching Language as Communication")

Widdowson recommends an approach which begins and ends with discourse: the students read or hear a text, they perform a variety of exercises related to that text, handling discourse coherence and cohesion, grammar and usage, etc., first analytically and then synthetically, and finally they produce a new written or spoken text. One example of a discourse exercise that he gives is the following scrambled text to be properly organized by the students:

> Turn the glass upside down.
> Take your hand away from the cardboard.
> This shows that air exerts a pressure upwards.
> Fill a glass to the brim with water.
> The cardboard remains against the glass and the water remains in the glass.
> Place a piece of cardboard over it.

Apart from adding "Don't forget to put your hand on the cardboard before turning the glass upside down!", one might comment that the average student is likely to learn more about English vocabulary ("upside down","cardboard","upwards", "brim") than about English discourse from this exercise. This comment does not by any means invalidate the general trend of Professor Widdowson's recommendation; but we should realize that we do not need to teach students about discourse from scratch (as with notions and functions they already know a lot about the universals), and that designing analytical/synthetic discourse exercises which will both help students and motivate them is no easy task.

Of course there is a place in the syllabus for structures and usage, for notions and functions and for discourse. But I believe that the major area for systematically guided learning is sentence grammar, vocabulary and usage. Systematic attention to notions, functions and to the coherence and cohesion of discourse is not necessary throughout the language, although it may be very necessary in certain areas. Let us not forget also that even educated native speakers often have marked inadequacies in communicative functions (many a piece of advice functions as an insult, many a polite request functions as an order) and in discourse coherence and cohesion. There may be a point beyond which systematically guided learning cannot work well; we can only organize communicative activities and hope the miracle will be completed.

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Note: The references to Interaction and Functional English in this article give a false impression of the books as a whole, which contain excellent material