

CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

This paper begins by noting that disappointments have been expressed with the communicative approach to language teaching, before discussing a number of problems involved in its implementation. This leads to the question of how English language teaching can attend to grammatical form, but without sacrificing the focus on communicative function. The paper then points to a convergence between strands of research in both theoretical and applied linguistics. In theoretical linguistics, the increasing prominence of ‘construction grammars’ resonates nicely with recent suggestions that ‘lexical phrases’ or ‘formulaic sequences’ should be given greater focus in language teaching. The rest of the paper goes on to consider the pedagogical value of the notion of a construction.

Keywords: Communicative approach, construction grammar, formulaic language, workplace communication

INTRODUCTION: PROBLEMS WITH CLT

In English language teaching (ELT), a major impetus for the shift towards the communicative approach to language teaching (CLT) came from the recognition that schools cannot merely view their role as preparing students to pass English language examinations (Widdowson, 1979, pp. 162-3). Rather, they must train students to actually use the language for a variety of work-related purposes or ‘actual communication’¹. The need to prepare students for language use in the workplace is all the more critical given that in this age of global markets and enterprise culture (Cameron, 2000a,b; Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996), employers have come to emphasize the importance of communication skills even more than before.

In this introductory section, I want to begin by noting, however, some disappointments expressed about the efficacy of CLT. Wallace (2002, p. 109), for example, takes CLT to task for being too preoccupied with what

she calls ‘the three Ds of consumerist EFL culture, *dinner parties*, *dieting and dating* ...’. She points out that such themes are not likely to ‘prepare students for longer term and relatively unpredictable needs as continuing learners and users of English.’ Similarly, Pennycook (1994, pp. 170-1) criticizes the stress on ‘informal interaction, enjoyment and functional communicative competence’ for encouraging, among other things, the belief that ‘as long as a message of some sort is passed from A to B, learning could take place.’ In addition to the views of Wallace and Pennycook, there have also been concerns that there is insufficient attention paid to the systematic teaching of grammar. Consider, in this regard, the following opinions expressed in an informal survey of some 40 Singaporean language teachers about their experiences in adopting CLT²:

- (i) Ideas take precedence, but [grammatical] accuracy is incidental. Students tend to be lost; they write without a language framework, and are unable to express ideas [which may be good] in a systematic and clear manner. The teacher has no framework to correct students’ work so that the correction appears to be random and piecemeal.
- (ii) Grammatical rules are taught by the inductive approach. Students are not conscious about the grammatical rules that they use, thus they are not able to recognize the errors.
- (iii) Grammar is taught incidentally. There is no real focus on the rules of grammar, and not many exercises on grammar for practice either. Children do not know when to use the correct tenses in sentence construction. If mistakes are highlighted to them, they sort of correct it for the moment and it recurs again in another piece of work.
- (iv) Wrong sentence construction/grammatical inaccuracies do surface and these are internalized by the students as accepted modes of speech.
- (v) Grammar is generally ignored, leading to poor language use.

These opinions indicate a general concern that grammar is not given enough explicit instruction. Consequently, teachers sometimes feel they have no meta-linguistic vocabulary that is shared with students, a vocabulary which would allow them (the teachers) to provide systematic explanations for any corrections that need to be made.

PROBLEMS WITH CLT

We can better appreciate the force of such dissatisfaction by noting various specific problems with how CLT has been implemented. The first problem is that there has been an excessive focus on communicative function while neglecting the grammatical structures that typically realize such functions. Put simply, there has been too much of a de-linking of form from function. One example of such a de-linking can be seen in the early work of Henry Widdowson. Consider his remarks on the teaching of English in science and other subjects (1979, p. 24):

Whether one is using English or French, Indonesian or Chinese, one is obliged, as a scientist, to perform acts, like descriptions, reports, instructions, accounts, deductions, the making of hypotheses, and the calculating of results. These are some of the basic cognitive and methodological processes of scientific inquiry and if one does not follow them, one presumably ceases to be scientific. What I am suggesting, then, is that the way English is used in science and in other specialist subjects of higher education may be more satisfactorily described not as formally defined varieties of English, but as realizations of universal sets of concepts and methods or procedures which define disciplines or areas of inquiry independently of any particular language.

Widdowson may have only intended to emphasize that there are communicative functions that are shared across languages. Unfortunately, remarks such as these have been interpreted as indicating that attention to function should be the primary pedagogical focus; knowledge of the relevant linguistic forms will come about, almost incidentally, as learners focus on the communicative tasks given to them. The problem, of course, is that, as a result, many learners fail to appreciate that there are linguistically conventionalized ways of realizing particular communicative acts. That is, effective communication in relation to a particular discourse community requires an appreciation of the kinds of communicative acts that are characteristic of the community, including the specific morphosyntactic (and phonological) realizations of such acts. For example, in a business letter, the act of closing the letter conventionally uses phrases such as 'Yours sincerely' or 'Yours truly.' And the opening vocative in some formal letters may allow for, or even require, a pragmatically vague form of address, such as 'To whom it may concern.' In these cases, the effective performance of

the communicative acts *cannot be separated* from their linguistic conventions.

The second problem concerns the fact that CLT has consistently failed to seriously bear in mind that the global spread of English and the concomitant rise of new Englishes means that many students already have some smattering of colloquial English (acquired from peers, magazines, movies or advertisements) even before they enter the classroom. What this means is that teachers are often dealing with 'interference' from different dialects rather than from a completely different language. Under these circumstances, teachers desperately need a meta-language that will allow them to discuss grammatical differences between the nonstandard variety of English that learners already know and the standard variety that they are expected to acquire. Access to such a meta-language is important because it will allow both teachers as well as students to better appreciate dialectal differences. As Cheshire (1982, p. 53) points out, a 'sympathetic awareness' by teachers of dialectal differences is crucial so that they come to realize that the dialect features that occur in written work are not mistakes, but regular grammatical features of non-standard Englishes. Otherwise, teachers are prone to correcting student work in 'a haphazard manner' (1982, p. 57). Worse yet, students may become less motivated since even if they realize that their particular use of English is inappropriate, they do not know why this is so (1982, p. 63).

The third problem arises from the excessive focus on the personalist view of communication (Duranti, 1992), where it is generally taken for granted that 'real/authentic' communication occurs only if the illocutionary intent that grounds the communicative act originates from 'within' the students themselves (Clarke, 1989; Skehan, 1988). This is then translated into the pedagogical goal of enthusing students sufficiently so that they would sincerely want (for themselves) to do things like understand cooking recipes, write science reports, formulate hypotheses, or inquire about the weather, all in the target language (Hall, 1995, p. 12; Rossner 1988, pp. 140-1). Unfortunately, this focus on students genuinely wanting to communicate for themselves confuses what they *want* with what they actually *need* (McGrath, 2002, p. 115). Actual communication, including workplace communication, is just as often about what one needs to communicate as much as what one may want to communicate.

The problems just mentioned raise the question of how ELT can attend to grammatical form, but without sacrificing the focus on communicative function. In the next section, I provide some suggestions based on the notion of a construction.

CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR AND ELT

The dissatisfaction with CLT has seen calls being made for a return to an emphasis on grammatical structure (cf. Carter, 1997, p. 34; Cameron, 1995, p. 90; Mitchell, 2000, p. 284). But clearly this should not mean a return to traditional grammar. One of the main reasons why traditional grammar was displaced by CLT was because it was seen as involving a mindless drilling of rules and structures that bore little relation to actual language use. Ironically, traditional grammar appears to be making a resurgence, because what was once seen as mindless drilling is now perceived as instilling discipline and clear-headedness (cf. Mitchell, 2000, pp. 288-9). However, all this means is that the pendulum is simply shifting from one end to the other. And this is clearly undesirable since we obviously do not want a situation where after a few years of ‘instilling discipline’, we witness yet another shift (back again) towards ‘real communication,’ motivated by the (now familiar) frustration that such drills bear little or no connection with actual language use. How, then, to provide an approach to grammar that is also sensitive to actual use?

Let us first note the various problems with traditional pedagogical grammar. It is decontextualized, with no consistent attention to communicative goals or contextual constraints. It is word and sentence based, with little or no recognition of idioms, conventional phrases, and non-sentential fragments. It is bottom-up, requiring learners to put words and sentences together to form larger constructions when fluent speakers sometimes work top-down from ‘pre-fabricated units’ (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992). It is unnecessarily terminological, requiring both learners and teachers to acquire a variety of grammatical labels. What we need, instead, is an approach to grammar and language teaching that is contextualized, where grammatical properties are consistently linked to communicative goals. We also need one that is not necessarily based on words and sentences, since actual communication can involve non-sentential constructions, including fixed idiomatic phrases. Such a grammar should also not be necessarily bottom-up or top-down, since language users can deal with utterances both compositionally as well as ‘holistically.’ And here, I think we can take advantage of an unusual convergence between strands of research in both theoretical and applied linguistics.

In theoretical linguistics, the increasing prominence of ‘construction grammars’ (Croft, 2001; Fillmore, Kay and O’Connor, 1988; Goldberg, 1995; Kay and Fillmore, 1999) is challenging the view that grammar can or should be treated autonomously. Constructions are defined as form-meaning relations, so that in any discussion of the properties of a construction, attention to both formal and functional properties is essential. Such formal

properties can include phonological and morphosyntactic features while functional properties (understood broadly) can include both semantic as well as pragmatic features. Because a construction is defined as a relation between form and meaning, anything from relatively small lexical items (words, affixes) to much larger sentential patterns, including anything in between, can all count as constructions. Larger constructions that have been discussed in the literature include The Resultative Construction (*He painted the house black*), The *What's X Doing Y* Construction (*What's this fly doing in my soup?*), and The Way Construction (*He whistled his way down the street*). This suggests a view of grammar where there is a continuum from the highly regular and composition to the much more idiomatic; there is no strict separation between the two. This conception of grammar has the advantage of allowing recognition of non-sentential idioms, fixed formulae, sentence fragments etc., as equally central phenomena alongside more traditional ones such as active sentences and their passive counterparts.

And when a meta-linguistic vocabulary or terminology is needed, it can be ad hoc since the focus is on identifying and describing the properties of particular constructions (see below). Any set of terms that serves this purpose will suffice. Thus, labels such as nouns, verbs, or clauses have no value in and of themselves outside of the purpose they serve in comparing the properties of constructions (cf. Croft, 2001). They are 'emergent' in the context of discussing specific constructions, serving the purely heuristic purpose of allowing the teacher and students to reflect on what they see as similarities and differences across various constructions. The focus on similarities and differences also draws on the fact that newer constructions can be combinations of other constructions, straightforward realizations of more general ones, or creative modifications of existing ones. Thus, a constructional perspective highlights the fact that language use involves general cognitive abilities (induction, deduction, analogical thinking) rather than any language-specific rules or capacities.

The idea of construction grammars convergences nicely with recent suggestions in ELT that 'lexical phrases' or 'formulaic sequences' should be given greater focus in language teaching (Lewis, 1993; Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992; Willis, 1990; see also Wray, 2000). As noted by Widdowson (1989, p. 135, italics added):

... communicative competence is not a matter of knowing rules for the composition of sentences and being able to employ such rules to assemble expressions from scratch as and when occasion requires. It is much more a matter of knowing *a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks, and a kit of rules*, so to speak, and

being able to apply the rules to make whatever adjustments are necessary according to contextual demands. Communicative competence in this view is essentially a matter of adaptation, and rules are not generative but regulative and subservient.

Similarly, Nattinger (1980, p. 341, *italics added*) suggests that:

... for a great deal of the time anyway, language production consists of piecing together the *ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation* and ... comprehension relies on knowing which of these patterns to predict in these situations.

Thus, knowing what the conventional ways of saying things are is an important part of knowing how a particular discourse community works and how interactions with members of such a community are appropriately conducted. This is because the conventional ways of sayings things are not merely matters of form, but associations between particular forms and particular meanings.

SOME CONSTRUCTIONS ILLUSTRATED

Compare the following two constructions, the first from colloquial Singapore English and the second from American English.

- (1) Why you paint the house green? [coll Sg Eng]
- (2) Why paint the house green? [Am Eng]

It is pedagogically useful for a teacher in a Singapore English classroom to be able to acknowledge that (1) and (2) serve similar pragmatics, though they have slightly different morphosyntactic properties (Alsagoff, Bao and Wee, 1998). In both, the speaker is asking for a justification concerning a particular situation. That is, the speaker is asking the hearer to provide a reason for painting the house green and implicates that unless good reasons can be given, it is probably not advisable to paint the house green.

But crucially, in Singapore English, the presence of second person pronoun 'you' is essential (3). In contrast, the presence of the same pronoun is unacceptable in the American version (4).

- (3) *Why paint the house green? [coll Sg Eng]
- (4) *Why you paint the house green? [Am Eng]

Being able to discuss these constructions *as constructions* gives the teacher the opportunity to focus on (i) how specific pieces of English are similar to or different from other pieces, and (ii) how the use of such pieces relate to particular kinds of pragmatic activities.

Because of (i), the teacher is not required to dismiss one variety of English as being better or superior to another. Rather, because pedagogical attention is on comparing different constructions (i.e. on their congregation of morphosyntactic and pragmatic features), the students' own use of English (however informal, colloquial or stigmatized) can serve as relevant pedagogical resources for language teaching. And because of (ii), students are automatically encouraged to adopt a more reflexive attitude towards their own language use amongst friends and family members (i.e. outside the classroom) as well as towards the target variety that they are expected to master in class.

Here is a second example, involving two passive constructions, the first (again) from colloquial Singapore English and latter from 'standard' English.

- | | | |
|-----|------------------|---------------|
| (5) | John kena pushed | [coll Sg Eng] |
| (6) | John was pushed | [std Eng] |

Here the teacher can begin by discussing the differences between the two passive constructions, asking learners to point out not only the differences in morphosyntax, but also any accompanying pragmatics. For example, it has been noted that the 'kena' passive favors an adversative reading while the standard passive is more neutral (Bao and Wee, 1999). So, (7) is not acceptable, unless the promotion is viewed as an unfortunate event for John.

- (7) ??John kena promoted

Crucially, from a language teaching perspective, learners are not expected to develop a detailed technical vocabulary (regarding, say, tense, aspect, preposition phrases, etc) before discussing these constructions. As mentioned above, the vocabulary can and should emerge from the discussion itself, as both teacher and students begin exploring the properties of constructions. Consequently, the resulting metalanguage would involve terms that refer not only to morphosyntactic properties, but to pragmatic (communicative) ones as well. More importantly, the meta-linguistic vocabulary is intended *purely as a heuristic* that allows both teacher and learners to communicate their understandings of the relevant constructions. There should be no expectation that these terms possess objective or

definitional significance that learners are obliged to adhere to. This last point is important when we consider the fact that students' own colloquial uses of English may involve elements from other languages, or constituent structures that are not always easily describable within a standard grammatical vocabulary. Consider, for example, the 'kena' passive. Treating the 'kena' passive as a construction allows the teacher draw on the students' own highly colloquial use of English, without having to worry about what kind of thing 'kena' 'actually' is. This is because, as was pointed out, the actual terms are not important, as long as students are encouraged to delve into the properties of constructions, paying attention to their linguistic forms and their communicative uses.

The existence of 'non-standard' grammatical structures is obviously not restricted to new Englishes. Thus, Carter (1997, pp. 57-8) points out that there are many grammatical structures in spoken (British) English that are used quite routinely by educated speakers. Yet, such structures are difficult to accommodate in ELT if 'proper' sentences are being privileged as the norm. Some of his examples are given below. (Carter does not himself use the term 'construction'. I have added the term here to Carter's own informal descriptive labels to indicate that these can all be treated as constructions for language teaching purposes.)

- (8) *Left-displaced Subject Construction* (with recapitulatory pronoun)
The women they all shouted.
- (9) *'Complete' Relative Clause Construction*
Which is why we put the Bunsen-burner on a low flame.
- (10) *Wh-pseudo Cleft Construction* (as 'summarizing conjunctions')
What I would do is, people should try a different policy.
- (11) *Fronted Anticipatory Phrase Construction*
That house in Brentford Street, is that where she lives?

The value, then, of a constructional approach is that the teacher is able to acknowledge and bring up for discussion bits and pieces of language use that may not be easily recognized in 'sentence-based' approaches to ELT. And furthermore, both teacher and learners are encouraged to develop their own informal meta-linguistic vocabulary when discussing these constructions, thus facilitating the students' own active sense of involvement in uncovering the properties of the constructions that they already use themselves, as well as the properties of those that they are expected to acquire.

While there may be a set of common constructions that the teacher is probably already familiar with (e.g. the passive, Wh- interrogative, declarative, etc), the teacher can also complement these with his/her own constructions. For example, the teacher may wish to draw students' attention to a 'Yours ADVERB' construction that is commonly used to end off letters (e.g 'Yours sincerely/truly/faithfully'). Students can learn by induction from specific examples, and expand on these examples, to investigate (i) what properties of the construction are variable (e.g. the adverb, though not just any adverb will do), (ii) what properties are invariant (e.g. the 'Yours', since 'His/her' or even 'Your' are unacceptable), and (iii) what communicative purposes the construction serves (e.g. is it more appropriate for some kinds of letters as opposed to others? does it ever get used in blogs, or SMSes? if not, how are similar functions realized in these other forms of communication?).

The teacher's own constructions may result from his/her observations of the students' own language use, and the kinds of texts that they are familiar with or interested in. In a construction-based ELT, then, the teacher should feel free to come up with constructions as s/he sees fit, extracting patterns and sub-patterns that s/he feels are salient enough to warrant being treated as constructions, given particular communicative tasks or particular texts. By doing so, the teacher is able to creatively make use of the students' own existing linguistic experiences as *resources* for learning more standard constructions.

CONCLUSION

A construction-based approach to ELT, then, has a number of advantages. Firstly, it consistently emphasizes the relationship between linguistic form and communicative function. Secondly, it allows for actual language use to be reflected in language teaching, since it can accommodate a wide range of grammatical structures. And thirdly, by doing so, it provides teachers with a principled reason for treating the students' own knowledge of English as a resource that can be used to scaffold them towards a more standard variety.

NOTES

1. While 'actual communication' is obviously a broad category, I shall focus here mainly on workplace communication. This is because there is a general expectation that whatever else the purpose of education may be, it includes preparing and credentializing learners for the workplace (Bills, 2004, p. 14) – and this expectation applies no less to ELT.

2. Most of these views were expressed in the form of short notes. Except for minor changes to make the sentences more ‘standard’, I have tried to present these comments verbatim.

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