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### *Introduction*

Grammar has been an object of interest and controversy for a long time. Finland is no exception. It perhaps even can provide an interesting case study of the role of grammar. Since Finnish obtained an official position only in the middle of the 19th century and education through the medium of Finnish dates from the same period, it is not surprising that the form of the school grammar has been consciously influenced by state ("blue ribbon") grammar committees. The first grammar committee submitted its report in 1888. A second committee report is often considered quite modern even today but it did not have much of an influence on school grammars, which is surprising because its chairman, professor E.N. Setälä, was a very prominent figure in Finland. It is even more surprising given the fact that Setälä's school grammars were in widespread use before the committee report and, in various editions, continued to be used in schools for fifty more years. Setälä himself considered it advisable to largely stick to the old grammatical terminology. I believe that we have here an instance of the strong role of tradition in teaching.

A new grammar committee published its report in mid-1994. The report contains a very interesting discussion of the history of grammar, a survey of modern linguistics, a discussion of language planning and promotion of correct usage, a comparison between Finnish and some other languages and it presents a draft of pedagogical grammar for the needs of mother tongue teaching.

The report shows that grammar is a creation that is dependent on human knowledge, interests and needs. As a historical phenomenon grammar has changed and keeps changing. The early history of grammar already demonstrates the two basic strands of grammar: its philosophical and practical aims. Philosophical grammar seeks to give philosophical explanations for grammatical rules. The practical role of grammar gained importance when it started to be needed as a tool in the teaching of Latin and subsequently other languages. Rhetorics can be regarded as the text grammar of antiquity.

### *Role of grammar*

In the next section I will draw largely on Henry Widdowson's work, which I find to combine theoretical and practical viewpoints in a useful and accessible manner and in a manner which I can basically agree with. Widdowson (1990) quotes Oliver Goldsmith's play *She Stoops to Conquer* a song which says "Let schoolmasters puzzle their brain With grammar, and nonsense, and learning..". He also refers to Firth, the noted British linguist, who once complained that grammarians make regular use of nonsense. Firth's point also applies to the typical use of isolated sentences in FL textbooks. As Widdowson says:

sentences as artificial constructs for exemplifying linguistic forms do not meet the same conditions of making sense as do expressions naturally used in the service of communication in context. They have no 'implication of utterance': whatever meaning *potential* they might have is removed from any realization, since the contexts which would provide the occasion for their use are of unlikely occurrence. Of course, many people concerned with language teaching have come to a similar conclusion. In consequence, there has arisen a deep distrust of sentences and, by association, of the grammar

they exemplify. But grammar cannot be equated with the devices used to exemplify its formal properties. There is more to it than that. (p. 80)

Grammar is clearly central to the working of language. But it is equally clear that its nature cannot be accounted for by demonstrating its rules by a random use of any lexical items that come to mind. I have suggested that it enters into some kind of relationship with words and contexts. Grammar is not just a collection of sentence patterns signifying nonsense, something for the learner's brain to puzzle over. (p. 81)

... the arrangements and alterations of grammar provide additional specification to lexical associations so that the words can relate more precisely to features of context, including those features which are incorporated into the knowledge of the language users themselves. The greater the contribution of context in the sense of shared knowledge and experience the less need there is for grammar to augment the association of words. The less effective the words are in identifying relevant features of context in that sense, the more dependent they become on grammatical modification of one sort or another. And of course where there can be no possibility of shared contextual knowledge, as in the case of unpredictable personal invention and interpretation, grammar provides the guarantee of individual freedom. ... Grammar is not a constraining imposition but a liberating force: it frees us from a dependency on context and the limitations of a purely lexical categorization of reality. (p. 86)

Grammar, then, can be seen as a resource for the adaptation of lexis. But there is no absolute distinction between the two, only a convenient distribution of semantic responsibility. Grammar is a device for indicating the most common and recurrent aspects of meaning which it would be tedious and inefficient to incorporate into separate lexical items. ... So grammar simply formalizes the most widely applicable concepts, the highest common factors of experience: it provides for communicative economy (p. 87)

In view of this complementary relationship of grammar and lexis, it is not surprising to find that there are units of meaning which are intermediary between lexical words and grammatical structures, the existence of which again indicates that there is a continuum between these levels of language. Such units are sentence-like in that they are syntactically combined sequences of words but they seem to be stored in the mind ready for use as preformed unitary items, like words, already assembled for immediate access... They are formulaic in character... They are the result of recall and not the composition of components by the application of syntactic rules... the ability to apply them in use accounts for the fluency of the native speaker. (p. 91)

What is semantically signalled by grammatical means in one language is left for pragmatic inference in another. (p. 93)

Communication, then, can only be achieved by relating language with context: grammar simply makes it easier to establish the relationship by setting, as it were, more exact co-ordinates. (p. 95)

What is crucial for learners to know is how grammar functions in alliance with words and contexts for the achievement of meaning. The teaching of grammar, as traditionally practised, does not promote such an alliance. On the contrary, it is the formal properties of the device which are commonly given prominence. Words come in only as convenient for purposes of illustration. In other words, lexis is put to the service of grammar. But as I have shown, the function of grammar depends upon its being subservient to lexis. Teaching which gives primacy to form and uses words simply as a means of exemplification actually denies the nature of grammar as a construct for the mediation of meaning. I would suggest that a more natural and more effective approach would be to reverse this traditional pedagogic dependency, begin with lexical items and show how they need to be grammatically modified to be communicatively effective. (p. 95)

A pedagogy which aimed at teaching the functional potential of grammar along the lines I have described, would have to get learners to engage in problem-solving tasks which required a gradual elaboration of grammar to service an increasing precision in the identification of relevant features of context. In this way, learners would realize the communicative value of grammar in the very achievement of meaning (p. 96)

I use the term 'realize' here in a deliberate double sense. On the one hand the approach I am approaching I am proposing would lead the learners to realize (in the sense of *actualize*) grammatical potential in contexts of use, that is to say that it would lead to effective behaviour. But on the other hand, the approach would also make learners realize (in the sense of *recognize*) the significance of grammar, and raise their consciousness of its relevance. (p. 96)

It seems sometimes to be supposed that what is commendable about a communicative approach to language teaching is that it does not, as a structural approach does, have to get learners to puzzle their heads with grammar. If we are looking for nonsense, this suggestion is a prime example. For if this were really the case, a communicative approach would have little or nothing to commend it. For language learning *is* essentially learning how grammar functions in the achievement of meaning and it is a mistake to suppose otherwise. The question is how should grammar be learned so that its intrinsic communicative character is understood and acted upon. This cannot be done by restricting attention to its formal properties, the relations and regularities which make up the internal mechanism of the device. No matter how legitimate it might be to define the scope of linguistics in this way (and this is currently a controversial matter), it will not do for language pedagogy. Learners need to realize the *function* of the device as a way of mediating between words and contexts,

as a powerful resource for the purposeful achievement of meaning. A communicative approach, properly conceived, does not involve the rejection of grammar. On the contrary, it involves a recognition of its central mediating role in the use and learning of language.

John L. Locke (1995) in a recent article published in *New Scientist*, reports on his own work (Locke 1993) and of others, which questions the relationship between speech and language.

"Until now, the picture has been roughly this. We use the code and rules of language to represent thoughts; we use our capacity for speech to communicate these representations. According to this view, speech is nothing more than a mechanical process, a "mouthpiece" which enables you to externalise the language that is in your head. But I believe that this notion is wrong: speech is much more than just a mouthpiece for language." (p. 30)

"Instead of seeing our capacity for language as the engine that drives speech, it becomes easier to see our capacity for speech as the driving force. Easier, too, to imagine language evolving in response to speech, as a system for policing its otherwise unruly output of sounds and babbling." (p. 30)

"Speaking is so natural that we need to have mechanisms that inhibit the activity when alone." (p. 33)

"What, then, can be said of *la langue*, the system of grammatical rules from which language derives its flexible creativity? The cognitive operations associated with grammar appear to begin as expedient strategies that help infants to deal with rapidly expanding vocabulary and thought. For language in the first instance is inherently organisational - a mental talent for making order out of lexical chaos - a means of handling all the utterances that are competing for slots in the infant's expressive vocabulary. But this would be unnecessary without pressures supplied by the activity we have come to know, simply, as talking.

These pressures may have worked in evolution, too. To date, no one has explained an important fact about the world's languages - every one of them is spoken. And yet, signed languages are learned very quickly by infants born to deaf parents, and used very efficiently by adults. Why are there no normally hearing cultures that sign instead of speak[ing]? The reason may be that when the benefits of symbolic communication through language became clear to our hominid ancestors, they were already talking. Language thus took advantage of, and arose within, this richly personal, socially-binding and vocally-variagated activity" (p. 33)

We can note that Locke as a neurologist/neurolinguist presents much the same argument as Widdowson as a linguist/applied linguist.

*Some notes on grammar teaching in Finland*

In a country like Finland, where knowledge of foreign languages is vitally important due to the considerable linguistic barriers and where language teaching in schools is a major investment of time and resources, the nature and quality of teaching assume a great deal of importance. While spontaneous language acquisition in bilingual families and areas is of interest and Swedish-Finnish bilingualism provides a very challenging topic for research due to cultural similarity but great topological difference, the study of language learning in the context of formal teaching is of greater practical use.

In formal language teaching, the teachers play a crucial role. Their activity is guided by their personal theory of what good teaching and learning is. This theory may be more or less implicit and it may be the result of a variety of sources. One of these sources is surely teacher education. There are some indications that, at least in a country like Finland with systematic and lengthy teacher education, it plays quite an important role in the formation of teachers' perceptions of good teaching and good grammar teaching.

The recent heightened interest in the role of linguistic awareness (metalinguistic knowledge) in Finland is reflected in a recent doctoral dissertation concerning early bilingualism and linguistic awareness (Østern, 1991). In a soon-to-be-completed licenciate thesis Ms Hanna Jaakkola, an experienced teacher of German and teacher educator from the Normal School of Helsinki University has studied teacher educators' views about the role of language knowledge in the pursuit of language proficiency. The thesis is supervised by the author of this paper and I have the permission to quote some of the preliminary findings of her study.

Jaakkola (1995, forthcoming) presented a detailed questionnaire to all fulltime teachers in the seven Finnish-language practice teaching schools in the spring of 1994. The total number of teachers was 97 in all, and 73 (75.3%) responded to it. On the basis of the responses, six teachers were selected for an in-depth interview.

Almost half of the experienced teacher trainers reported that they spent 20-25% of all instructional time on teaching language knowledge. Three fourths indicated using the inductive approach. Approximately 60% stated that there should be a definite emphasis given to language knowledge while some 18% disagreed. It was obvious that while teaching language knowledge was considered important, fluency was regarded as more important than accuracy. Teaching language knowledge was not felt to be specially problematic, there was a moderate satisfaction with the obtained results but still some indication of a desire to change one's teaching approach, if only one knew how.

There was a fairly strong view that rich input does not suffice to help pupils acquire/learn the structure of the language nor just drawing pupils' attention to the grammatical point being learned. There was somewhat less tendency to think that several structural points are learned without being taught.

Teacher educators held quite strongly that knowing rules helps in language use and that explicating structures helps in reading and listening comprehension. Interestingly enough, there was an equally strong view that learning FL structures is largely similar than learning anything else.

Teacher educators agreed quite strongly with the statement that "rules of thumb" help in



language use and almost equally strongly that language knowledge/grammar is learned best by drawing inferences on the basis of a set of examples (from a sample of language). Most teacher educators report using the mother tongue when grammatical points are analyzed.

Teacher educators did not express any strong support for the view that school instruction leads to the automatization of rules; the same is true concerning the cutting down the share of grammar if something ought to be cut in instruction. They tended to disagree with the view that pupils find grammar study unpleasant. The same is true of the claim that it is especially the weak pupils who benefit from grammar teaching.

Teacher educators had a neutral view concerning the claim that the multiple-choice cloze test in the national matriculation examination measures language knowledge well.

There was a clear difference between those teachers who taught long courses (altogether 6-10 years) vs. those who taught shorter courses (3-5 years): those teaching the longer courses agreed more strongly with the view that structural points are learned without teaching and that rules are automatized in class. The reverse trend was observed concerning the unpleasantness of grammar and the benefit that weak pupils draw from the teaching of grammar.

The interview comprised 6 teacher educators half of whom had worked as teachers for 10 - 20 years and the other half over 20 years. Four of the six had had their own teaching practice in English.

Teacher educator A uses a valence-based grammar approach in Russian emphasizing the role of the verb. In English she devotes systematic attention to the tense system.

Teacher educator B has along with growing experience cut down the number of grammatical points she teaches in German lessons. Some grammatical points are now treated more like lexical items. She now allows more time for individual pupils to internalize structures. Knows various grammar models but employs the traditional one.

Teacher educator C uses a functionally oriented grammar, emphasizing what a particular structure can express. Aspires to helping all pupils to acquire a core grammar (word order, tenses, conditional) and would give more emphasis to phrasal verbs and prepositions.

Teacher educator D draws on the grammar sections included in his/her Swedish textbooks. Tried out some ideas of generative grammar and notional syllabus but did not really succeed.

Teacher educator E uses traditional grammar approach in French and teaches core grammar, especially the conjugation of regular verbs, tenses and pronouns. Has tried to make his/her teaching more effective by focusing grammar instruction on salient points.

Teacher educator E uses traditional grammar approach in her Russian classes but favours now pragmatic, task-based grammar teaching. Employs linguistic awareness. Has placed tables of cases and tenses on the classroom wall, hoping that they will help transition from knowledge to skill. Considers the grasp of the system more important than knowing the inflectional endings by heart. Core grammar includes the cases, verb tenses and aspects, pronouns and the inflection of adjectives.

A colleague of Ms Jaakkola's, Ms Leena Vaurio, is also working on the final version of her licentiate thesis (Vaurio, 1995, forthcoming) which is also supervised by the author of this article. She has studied lexical inferencing in the context of reading English texts in the upper secondary school. Drawing on an extensive schema-theoretical literature on reading - especially in L1 but to some extent also in L2 - and on also quite substantial writing on inferencing, she has taught and tested lexical inferencing. She underlined unfamiliar words in texts and the students had to give their Finnish equivalents and occasionally also explain how they arrived at their answers. On the basis of a detailed analysis of 31 students' answers, she arrived at 12 categories of sources/strategies in lexical inferencing:

1. Global processing
2. Local analysis
3. Morphological analysis
4. Knowledge of the world
5. Conventions of the written language
6. Interlingual influence

According to Vaurio (1995, forthcoming), the first six strategies or knowledge sources may lead to either correct or incorrect inferences, whereas the remaining six cause misunderstandings:

7. Selective attention
8. Poor word recognition skills
9. Poor syntactic skills
10. "One word-one meaning" approach
11. Reliance on impression
12. Wild guessing

In a study of retention, Vaurio used the same text which was a normal end-of-course test after a traditional theme-based 6-week course. After 6 weeks of no English and another 6 weeks of studying another theme-based English course they took the same test (maximum points - 20). All students but one improved, the gain varying from 1 to 10 points. The one student who showed no improvement was an excellent student who score almost the maximum score on both occasions. Improvement was related to sensitivity to syntactic patterns, prepositions and phrasal verbs, word formation rules, semantic sophistication. On a more global level, there was some evidence of a shift to more top-down processing and more interaction between top-down and bottom-up sources of inference. A detailed study of two less successful students showed interesting clear differences in inferencing between a shy, conscientious and introvert adolescent male student and a lively, talkative and extravert female student. This suggests that these two students would benefit from clearly different teaching approaches. This, no doubt, can be generalized to apply to the teaching of grammar in general.