

# Form, meaning and function: a new look at reference grammars

The purpose of this article is to examine briefly a few issues related to the problem of describing the grammar of a language when that language is seen primarily as a means of communication. We shall mainly be concerned with the issues raised by the development and use of a *reference grammar* of English.

The term *reference grammar* needs some clarification. In the last few years a renewed interest in grammar and in its role in language teaching and learning has led to significant changes in published materials: new grammars and grammar 'workbooks' have been produced, and the main coursebooks themselves, after neglecting or underestimating explicit grammatical explanations for a considerable time, now often provide 'grammar' sections of some sort. The grammar presented in a coursebook is usually confined to the descriptions of those language items which have been selected and graded by the authors, i.e. which make up the *syllabus* of the particular coursebook. A *systematic, general description* of the language is rightly outside the scope of a coursebook, and is precisely what a *reference grammar* attempts to provide.

Thus the aim of a *reference grammar* is to offer a set of supplementary materials which may prove helpful for revision purposes, and whenever teachers and/or students need to place any language item within the general framework of a coherent and comprehensive description of the language system. This need for a more systematic organization of language materials is indeed felt at various stages in the learning process, and particularly by adolescent and adult students at secondary school and university levels.

Obviously the strong bias towards seeing language as communication, which is apparent in most coursebooks, has had profound implications for the way language itself can be described, and therefore for the design and organization of a *reference grammar*. The emphasis on the *semantic* and *pragmatic* views of language, i.e. on the *meanings* it is possible to convey through language and on the communicative *intentions* that can be carried out through its *use*, has complemented the more traditional, but still essential, feature of *reference grammars*, i.e. systematic treatment of the formal regularities of language.

Designing a *reference grammar* of English thus poses two main sets of problems:

1. how to define the areas of language study which can be subsumed under the very general term of 'grammar';
2. how to describe language *both* as a structured system of elements *and* as a dynamic tool for expression and communication.

The first set of problems arises from the awareness that the 'traditional' categories of morphology and syntax, which have always made up the core of a *reference grammar*, certainly do not exhaust the range of linguistic features called for by a semantic and pragmatic view of language. If this is the case, which *additional* descrip-

tive categories are needed? In other words, what extent should we give to the term 'grammar'?

Seeing language as communication seems to open up the possibility of developing at least three different levels of analysis in describing language:

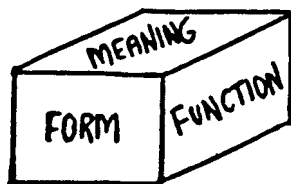
a) we may concentrate on the *formal* properties of language as a structured system, and thus highlight the 'rules' by which we can discriminate sounds (*phonology*) and written symbols (*graphology*), and by which words are structured (*morphology*) and put together in sentences (*syntax*). As has already been said, this level of analysis belongs to the traditional area of concern of grammars, and continues to be an important and essential way of looking at the language;

b) we may, on the other hand, concentrate on what we *mean* through language, rather than on its formal regularities, and thus consider it in terms of the *concepts* we express through it (*notions*) and the means

we employ to do this (e.g. *lexis* and *idioms* to express topic- or situation-related notions);

c) we may finally be more concerned with what we *do* through language, and therefore emphasize the *communicative intentions* we carry out when we use it, the various ways in which sentences are put together to form *texts*, and how oral and written *discourse* is successfully realized to serve the purposes of language users.

These three levels of analysis — by which we alternatively highlight language mainly as a) **form**, b) **meaning** or c) **function** — should not make us forget that, beyond the different ways in which we may analyze and categorize language for the purposes of our investigation, language is a comprehensive human experience. The various ways we have devised to describe it should not therefore hinder the fact that we are dealing with a unified whole. Thus we may illustrate the different dimensions of language like this:



This brings us to the second set of problems mentioned above, i.e. how we can possibly make ourselves and our students aware of language *both* as a coherent, structured system *and* as a multi-dimensional tool for communication.

The issue is of the utmost importance, since what we are concerned with here is precisely the *mental image* that we as teachers, as well as our students, are led to create in our minds by the adoption of teaching and learning approaches which emphasize, in turn and perhaps haphazardly, *either* or *both* the 'structural' and the 'communicative' views of language. Is it then possible to devise strategies by which language users can be led to discover and appreciate *at the same time* the three ways in which we can look at language — in terms of *form*, *meaning* and *function*? Is it possible to promote a mental

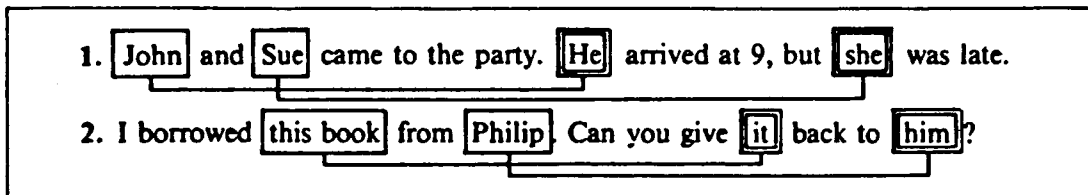
image of language by which sets of discrete linguistic items, characterized by *formal* regularities, can be seen not just as static parts of a system, but also as elements playing an active role in enabling people *to mean* things and *to do* things?

I believe that a *reference* grammar can do something to promote this sort of *language awareness*, provided it constantly keeps all dimensions of language in focus. The analysis of a linguistic item can then start from *any* of the above three levels, and highlight either or both of the other levels according to the kind of item under consideration, the age, level, and interests of the students, and the purpose of this learning operation itself.

Thus morphological items such as *personal pronouns* will certainly continue to be described in terms of their *formal* properties (forms, concord, position in

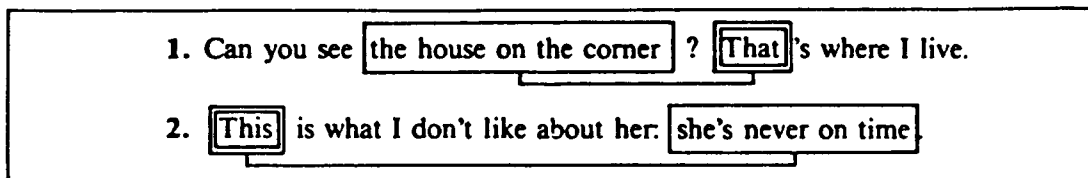
relation to verbs, etc.), but we will also highlight their *semantic* values in identifying *notions* of entities (such as people,

places and objects) and, above all, their *functional* role in ensuring the cohesion of discourse:



In the same way, we can describe *demonstratives* not only in terms of their *forms* (singular and plural), but also in terms of the *meaning* they convey in identifying entities and their *position* in *space* and

*time* (*this* record, *that* morning), and in terms of the *function* they perform in *referring back* or *forward* to other items in the text:



We can accordingly consider a lexical area, such as the formation of *negative words*, in order to highlight *both* the *formal* features of language items (i.e. the *mechanics* of word formation through *prefixes*: for example, which kind of prefixes can be added to different word classes such as nouns, verbs and adjectives), and the *concepts* (i.e. *notions*) that can be expressed in this way (e.g. a) *opposite meaning* (*dis-*, *in-*, and *un-*); b) *absence of connection* (*non-*); c) *wrong or incorrect action* (*mis-*):

a) There are advantages and *disadvantages* in this project.

What you say in *in* formal situations is often *inadequate* in formal ones. After I had locked my suitcase I had to *unlock* it to put in my pyjamas.

b) He took a *non-stop* flight to New York. The meeting of the *non-aligned* countries will take place in Vienna.

c) Some English sounds are often *mispronounced* by the Italians.

A printing error is called a *misprint*.

The long-debated relationship between 'structures' and 'functions' can also be introduced to students by stimulating their awareness that structural items, for which we usually provide *formal* descriptions

(e.g. the *imperative* mood) can be put to a variety of *functional* uses, which range from the more obvious ones (e.g. *orders* and *commands*) to subtler shades of meaning (e.g. a) *reminding* people to do things, or b) *persuading* and *encouraging*):

a) *Remember* to buy some sugar.

*Don't forget* to call at the library.

b) *Go in*.

*Have a go*.

*Come on*.

Thus morphological and syntactical items lose their traditional rigidity, which they tend to preserve when only their *formal* properties are highlighted, and assume a new flexibility in conveying *meaning* and in playing a *functional* role in oral and written discourse. It is accordingly possible to show how different *communicative intentions* are linked by the use of the same structural and lexical exponents: a) below, for example, shows that to *make an informal complaint* one can make use of 'structures' (*imperative*, *modal will*) which often express *orders* and *requests*. Subtler shades of meaning can again be conveyed when making a *polite formal request*, which is in fact an *ironical* way of *making a complaint*, as is the case in b) below. A

*more formal complaint* can be made by using expressions which would normally be employed to *make apologies* (see c) below):

- a) *Turn off that radio, will you.* I'm trying to read.
- b) *Would you mind making less noise?*
- c) (*Guest in a hotel*):  
*Sorry but I can't close the window in my room.*  
*I'm afraid my window doesn't close.*

A *reference grammar* is perhaps the most suitable vehicle to investigate the relationships between the different dimensions of language, since it provides the general systematic framework which is necessary both to cross-reference different linguistic items and to retain throughout the image of language as a consistent, unified whole. In this way a *reference grammar* can make its positive contribution to the definition of the role of 'grammar' itself in communicative language teaching and learning.

(i) All examples are taken from Mariani, L., et al., *Grammatica Inglese della Comunicazione*, Zanichelli, Bologna, 1984.