What Is "Grammar"?

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The very "foreignness" of speaking a foreign language is another matter deserving further attention. For many linguistically unsophisticated people the fact of speaking a given language and belonging to its corresponding nationality stand in an implicational relationship. If an American shows, for example, a Russian that he can speak his language, the Russian may have one of several reactions: he may refuse to admit the fact that the American does, in reality, speak Russian; he may accept the fact, but insist that the American is either Russian or Russian in background, as if the ability to speak foreign languages is somehow transmitted either genetically or through some kind of "racial memory"; he may seemingly accept the fact that the American does in fact speak Russian, even compliment him on his command of that language, all the time continuing to speak to the American in English if he unconsciously cannot accept what he consciously admits.

When two people enter into a relationship there generally is at the same time established the language in which that relationship will be maintained. If a native American professor of Russian establishes a relationship with a Russian-born colleague in which the language of communication is English, it will be extremely difficult for the native Russian to communicate with his colleague in Russian. The basic rule is that in America one communicates with Americans in English. On the other hand, if both speak German (as a later acquired language), the possibility of both communicating in German is not excluded; in this latter instance both parties are playing the game of speaking a foreign language. But speaking one's native language is never a game!

Although examples could (and should) be multiplied, it should be clear that the very "foreignness" of foreign languages is one of the major factors which can inhibit the proper acquisition and use of these languages and that this factor must be taken into consideration continually in the teaching of foreign languages at any level.

What is "Grammar"?

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Whenever a group of language teachers or professors meet and the word "grammar" is mentioned, emotions flare up and true communication often ceases—a Pandora's box has been opened. An explanation of this phenomenon and a clarification that would help reduce its re-occurrence seem to be urgently needed. 1

This paper hopes to expose the causes of these disagreements by showing that the term "grammar" is not only polysemous but also greatly misunderstood or misinterpreted. It also hopes to be didactic in its attempt to clarify what "grammar" actually is or isn't. What the term refers to is by no means obvious, nor have matters been simplified by some of the contemporary additions to its list of meanings. Moreover, an awareness of this terminological confusion, a knowledge of how the term is used, and an understanding of the concepts for which it stands appear to be essential pre-requisites to any related methodological or curricular discussion.

Before proceeding, certain assumptions should be made explicit. It is assumed that the conventions of speech differ somewhat from those of writing but that each has its own set of rules, its own set of conventions; moreover, ability to speak does not necessarily imply ability to write. It is assumed that we are describing the conventions of a particular language or dialect and not saying that the usages of one dialect should be adopted by those who speak or write any other. That is, our purpose is descriptive

1 I have often witnessed or participated in such discussions or "arguments." For instance, a speaker who, at a recent foreign language meeting, stated that American high school students know the "grammar" of their native language, was promptly and acrimoniously interrupted by a group in the audience which emphatically shouted: "Oh no, they don't!" This paper should reveal how the speaker and the group were both right, yet both at fault.
rather than prescriptive. However, both descriptive statements and prescriptive rules employ terms to identify the details of a language.

It is also assumed that, at its present point of development, a language is what is currently and actually spoken by a speech community—not what was spoken in the near or distant past, nor what ought to be spoken because some people may believe that the language is deteriorating or going to the dogs. It should be added that, if we attempt to change or to alter the language or “grammar” of certain individuals, what we are really doing is teaching them another language or dialect or variety of a particular language—that of the educated middle class, perhaps, or the accepted standard. This does not mean that said individuals don’t know “grammar,” but that their “grammar” is different from ours. Some readers may not readily accept all of these assumptions. For the linguist they are axioms; for us they constitute a frame of reference that is essential to an understanding of much of the ensuing discussion.

I hope to reach the objectives stated at the beginning of the second paragraph through: a) a listing of common attitudes or reactions to “grammar,” and b) a presentation and discussion of the term’s diverse interpretations—with particular emphasis on what I shall later call GK (Grammatical Knowledge) and GD (Grammatical Description).

In many cases “grammar” is still regarded as:
1. A set of prescriptions, possibly handed down by a supreme being, which tell what is the True, the Logical, the Right, the One and Only way to speak and write.
2. Something to memorize (rules to memorize).
3. Something one neither understood nor mastered in school.
4. Something taboo, a dirty word. A word not to be mentioned in certain educational circles if one wishes to be considered as “being with it.”
5. A book which prescribes the same as in number 1, above.
6. Something that went out of existence with decline of the grammar-translation method.

In many other cases “grammar” is confused with:
7. Usage—when to use like as opposed to as, and less as opposed to fewer in English, or segue as opposed to dopo, and precedente as opposed to prima in Italian.

or even with:
8. Spelling—This writer recently observed a teacher who spent a whole class period on purely orthographic alternations in Spanish (graphemic representations of the velar stop in buscar, etc.) because he claimed the students should master “grammar.” It is not my intention to minimize the importance of spelling; my point is that the teacher believed and argued that what he was teaching was “grammar.”

I take the liberty to put aside categories 1 through 8 and to file them, perhaps, under mythology or misconceptions. Then, after a very brief historical sketch, I will turn to the brilliant contributions which scholars and linguists have made on our topic especially in the course of this century.

Although the term “grammar” comes from a Greek word which may be translated as “the art of writing” both the Greeks and their successors used it with a wider sense which embraced the whole study of language. More recently, however, the term has developed a narrower interpretation which restricts it to what was known in classical grammar as inflection and syntax or morphology and syntax. Philology, in the nineteenth century, and structuralism, during the first half of the twentieth, both used the term in this sense. Still more recently, transformational-generative grammarians are, in a way, unintentionally returning to the older meaning of “grammar” and use the term to refer to the whole system of language. Besides avoiding prescriptive statements, however, these modern grammars still recognize a distinction between linguistic description (information about language or a language) and rhetoric.

2 The quasi-euphemism structure has been a vogueish yet excellent substitute for “grammar.” In some cases, however, the two terms are not interchangeable.
5 Ibid.
WHAT IS "GRAMMAR"?

(advice as to the practical use of a language). The older sense included both and some of the current difficulty stems from mixing the two.

Even if we limit ourselves to recent developments, then, we can note that "grammar" is open to several interpretations. In addition, it must be remembered that philology relied heavily on the written language and was particularly concerned with historical developments, whereas twentieth-century linguistics has focused its attention on the spoken language and on synchronic studies.

The various interpretations of the term, as it is currently being used, might be "grammar" as:

A. The actual system or structure of a language (morphology-syntax interpretation or other).
B. A person's knowledge of that structure or the ability which underlies its use.
C. A grammarian's description of the system or of the speaker's grammatical knowledge (more about this will follow) which could be:
   1. A structural grammar,
   2. A transformational-generative grammar,
   3. A traditional (scholarly) grammar.
   4. Any other grammar, such as tagmemic, stratificational, etc.

"Grammar" may also refer to:

D. A treatise which contains one of the analyses listed under C.
E. A pedagogical treatise based on one or more of the descriptions listed under C.

If a student were to state that his grammar of French cost him seven dollars, we would readily know that he is referring to E, above. If he were to say that he doesn't like grammar, he is probably still referring to pedagogical treatises or, possibly, to one or more of the categories under C. However, when teachers often state: "I teach grammar," "The teaching of grammar is outmoded" or "My students don't even know the grammar of their own language," are they referring to A, to B, to C, to E, or to all of these? Since I find this question much more complex and harder to answer than the previous ones, I am inclined to conclude that what we educators mean by "grammar" is frequently ambiguous and often not even clear to ourselves.

The kind of grammatical description which prevailed up to the late fifties was a description of performance (observable data) and the theory and method used were essentially empirical. Noam Chomsky and his followers, on the other hand, have set as their goal the description of competence and their approach is essentially rationalistic. In other words, the transformationalists have, in a way, redefined "grammar." In addition, the structuralists (tacitly) and the transformationalists (explicitly) have used the term with a systematic ambiguity. Chomsky and Halle state:

We use the term "grammar" with a systematic ambiguity. On the one hand, the term refers to the explicit theory constructed by the linguist and proposed as a description of the speaker's competence. On the other hand, we use the term to refer to this competence itself.  

 Arbitrarily and for convenience I will refer to the competence as Grammatical Knowledge, and to its description as Grammatical Description, and refer to these by the acronyms GK and GD, respectively. Although for the structuralists GK would be reflected principally in the speaker's observable grammatical performance, and GD would refer to the description of observable data, for our purposes and, with obvious dangers, my discussion will COMBINE the structural and the transformational view of what I call GK and GD.

GK and GD now need further explanation. Either with the structuralist morphology-syntax interpretation, or with the more inclusive transformational-generative interpretation, GK refers to the structural pattern, the code, the

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*Traditional scholarly grammar is to be distinguished from traditional school grammar. The latter was prescriptive, much too concerned with usage, and too often not based on actual linguistic data. The former was an erudite analysis which, however, was handicapped by its failure to keep oral and written data apart, and by the need for a synchronic-diachronic dichotomy.  

* Some argue that competence is a weasel word, a nebulous concept that does not lend itself to description, and that the competence-performance distinction is a contrivance. Those who use the term define it as the speaker's linguistic intuition, his tacit knowledge, the capacity which underlies his ability to produce grammatical sentences in his language. Performance, on the other hand, refers to the speaker's actual output.  

* For a legible treatment of the various objectives of these grammars, see: Sumner Ives, "The New Grammars," The English Record (April, 1969), pp. 13-29.  

knowledge, or the competence which a speaker has acquired and which enables him to understand, to formulate, and to produce grammatical sentences in his language. Admittedly, these are products and processes we don’t know very much about, yet the speaker’s intricate GK is clearly displayed in his speech production or performance.

English speakers, for example, automatically supply the definite article where it is needed and omit it where it is not: The Middle East, Central America, France, Italy, etc. Speakers of French, on the other hand, regularly supply the article in all of these examples. Speakers of Spanish do not confuse the use of the preterite and the imperfect tenses. Speakers of Italian know when to use di and when to use che as conjunctive particles in comparisons of inequality. Yet none of these speakers is totally aware of what he is doing or why. None of these speakers could supply a set of explicit directions which would automatically lead the non-speaker into making the proper choice. Some of these speakers, in fact, may not have the foggiest notion of what is meant by a definite article, an imperfect tense, or a conjunctive particle, yet they are said to know—and justly so—the “grammar” of their language. Grammar in this sense (GK) is a sine qua non for speakers of a language. This seems to be an indisputable fact.

To put it another way, to know a language includes knowing its grammar (GK), and to learn a language includes learning its grammar (GK). H. A. Gleason, Jr. writes that it would obviously be ridiculous to talk about a foreign language course that promised “no grammar” since any learning of linguistic structure includes learning its grammar.11

We now turn to grammatical description (GD). By GD is meant the linguist’s descriptive account of the primary data supplied by the speaker(s) and, possibly, of the knowledge (competence) which the speakers demonstrate through said data. GD, then, is an analysis which attempts to describe the language in question or to discover what the speaker knows and does. This is in some cases a workable task, in most cases a very difficult or even unsuccessful one (Cf. reference to note 10). For such an analysis or description a set of “tools” is used. These tools are the theories, the techniques, the procedures, and the systems of terminology with which we may or may not be familiar, and which often vary according to the affiliation of the analyst. Thus we hear of various GD’s (as mentioned under C, above) and of familiar terms like adverb, direct object, and predicate adjective, or of more esoteric ones like complementary distribution, tagmeme, base rules, and lexical formatives.13 For example, “Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, or adverbs in English” is a possible statement in traditional GD which can be justified only according to whether it is or it is not an accurate descriptive statement. “All comparative clauses are derived from at least two deep structure sentences” is a statement in transformational GD which may or may not be revealing.

GD, then, strives to provide rules, generalizations, and explanations of such things as when the is required in English, when the imperfect is used as opposed to the preterite in Spanish, and so on. Grammar in this sense (GD) is not something that everyone must be familiar with. The vast majority of speakers of any language, to be sure, are not acquainted with the theories, techniques and terminologies of grammatical description, and yet some of them may be admired for their “command” of the language. Those who teach a language, it will be argued, should not only have acquired its grammatical structure (GK), but should also be versed in its description (GD).

Concluding our journey through this terminological labyrinth, I hope to have shown that the apparent confusion is due in part to popular

12 As stated previously, the transformationalists are particularly concerned with giving an account of competence, and with the discovery of universals of language. According to Chomsky, a GD that simply gives an inventory and a classification of the observable data (observational adequacy) is hardly satisfactory or worthwhile and could be compared to the Pre-Darwinian stage in biology. See his Current Issues in Linguistic Theory (The Hague, 1964), pp. 28-35, for a discussion of what he calls observational, descriptive, and explanatory adequacy.
misconceptions, in part to the historical shifts in the use of the term, and most of all to the numerous possible interpretations which I listed above as A through E, and which are far from being transparent. As the GK-GD dichotomy appears to be the main source of ambiguity, it is suggested that in our discussions we make at least this distinction explicit. Otherwise, when "grammar" is mentioned, it would seem possible to conceive that, in a group of about a dozen people, each person might have a different notion of what is being referred to.

In addition, as stated previously, I argue that an awareness of the polysemy of the term "grammar" and of the concepts for which it stands must necessarily precede any pedagogical deliberation on its place in the curriculum, on its objectives, and on its methodological presentation. How indispensable this background might be is summarized in a statement by Di Pietro:

To a certain extent, the language teacher must be his own grammarian. He must arrive at some conceptualization of how language is organized in general if he is to prepare teaching materials which systematically cover all matters of importance to his students. No matter what his approach to teaching may be (he may decide never to openly formulate rules of grammar), he must proceed according to some master blueprint of grammar. At the very least, he must understand the grammatical plan adopted by the writer of his textbook.

The skills or concepts that Di Pietro mentions imply some training in both theoretical and applied linguistics—perhaps more training than can realistically be expected. In any case, this points to the need for a rearrangement of emphases in many current teacher preparation programs. According to Edgerton,

Every teacher of a foreign language must be a linguist, in the technical, scientific sense of the term. Preparation for a teaching career should necessarily involve course work in basic linguistics, cultural anthropology, and those topics in philosophy which are most immediately relevant to our purpose, especially epistemology. I would point out, in this context, that the vast majority of people now teaching foreign languages in this country have no sound, linguistic knowledge of the English language and at best only a rather superficial knowledge of the reality of the language they teach.

So far my discussion has been geared primarily to the needs of the language teacher. Going somewhat beyond the original scope of this paper, I now add some remarks on its pedagogical implications. In English courses for native or near-native speakers of standard English who, according to our assumptions, know the "grammar" (GK) of their language, a GD of that language is relevant—just as the study of the digestive system and process would be relevant in a biology class in which all of the students may have excellent digestion. A study of this nature is justified not only as an academic discipline and as a kind of scientific, philosophical, and psychological inquiry, but also as an analysis through which one can gain insights into the depth, scope, abstractness, and complexity of the wonder of language. What I am implying here is that exposure to GD does not necessarily produce better public speakers or composition writers, just as a study of the digestive system and process does not guarantee better digestion.

Moreover, as a species-specific activity, language is high on the list of those items that differentiate humans from other animals and as such is very much worthy of study per se. Many psychologists, and psycholinguists in particular, believe that if we could only explain how language is acquired by children and how communication takes place, we would surely gain tremendous knowledge about the human mind.

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14 It is the failure to have noted this distinction that caused the incident mentioned in note 1. It appears that by "grammar" the speaker meant GK, whereas the "group" was thinking of GD. If so, both were right. However, the speaker's failure to have explicitly made this distinction, and the group's ignorance of the polysemy of "grammar" makes them both "guilty."


17 Obviously, TESOL and ESD (English as a Second Dialect) are not included in this category.


19 Any real insights gained into the nature of language and any benefits thereof are often not measurable and at best subjectively measurable. But then, we have for too long been obsessed with testing in this country, and have frequently eliminated from the curriculum those areas of study which did not readily lend themselves to so-called "relevant and measurable behavioral objectives."
—something we don’t know very much about.

A GD of English, then, should begin in the sixth grade and systematically continue through high school. For the sake of variety, one particular day per week could be specifically or primarily devoted to GD, with the others being reserved for reading, composition, literature, etc., respectively. Which type of GD is emphasized is somewhat irrelevant, as long as it is not dogmatic but based on the actual grammatical structure of English and on its regular, productive mechanisms. High school students could perhaps have two English teachers instead of one—one to be more of a specialist on language, the other more of a literature and composition enthusiast. A class could report to the former two days per week, and to the latter three days per week. This could easily be arranged within the framework of traditional scheduling and would seem to provide a more substantive innovation than some of the current fads (e.g., modular or rotating schedules) which, in my opinion, do not really get at the alleged causes of the daily monotony of secondary education.

At the college level, where it is still tacitly or openly regarded as having meager importance in comparison to literary studies, GD should be a major component in the preparation of teachers of English. In addition, it should be extended into previous periods of the history of the language, and be explored for its potential of providing added means of examining and analyzing literary texts.

We have established that native or near-native speakers of a language have a GK of that language, but not necessarily a knowledge of its GD or of GD in general. Students of a foreign language, on the other hand, having not yet acquired the GK of the target language, are neither capable nor ready to undertake its GD in the same way. Since the teaching of “grammar” as GK is in this case not only desirable but unavoidable (Cf. footnote 11), we come to the role which GD might play in foreign language teaching. Incidentally, when not too many years ago many native and foreign language educators advocated abandoning the teaching of “grammar,” they were obviously—though not explicitly—referring to GD. This was due not only to the revolt against traditional GD, and against the grammar-translation method, but also to the correct observation that to speak or write a language one does not necessarily have to be well versed in GD.

At the junior high school level or below, GD of the target language should be kept to a minimum. Depending on the analytical sophistication of the students and on their amount of curiosity, the teacher could point out things _en passant_ or at their request. With older students GD should be more than a mere means to an end. Acquisition of GK at the beginning and intermediate levels cannot but gain from CAREFUL descriptive formulations and from conscious awareness of how the foreign language structures are “assembled.”^20 In addition, more attention should be paid to “overt discussion of the nature of language or of the English language as contrasted with the foreign language . . . .”^21

In spite of the ambitious objectives of our profession, the vast majority of American students will never become fluent speakers of a foreign language, nor will they make use of it in their daily lives. Only those who plan on a career in foreign languages or those who really want to, for whatever reason, will ever achieve this goal. For the others the value of foreign language study should be reflected in what is left when the ephemeral, partial skills acquired in two or three years in the classroom will be forgotten. The study of foreign languages, then, remains essentially a unique linguistic and cultural experience, in that order. As Edgerton claims, “One valuable acquisition which should accrue to the student from his study of a foreign language is an insight into the nature of human language itself.”^22

At the advanced levels (majors or minors nearing graduation, or graduate students) GD can serve not only as an intensive and systematic review of the GK hopefully already acquired, but also as a forum for the critical evaluation of pedagogical GD’s. Moreover, what I have previously said in reference to college level English also applies here, and _vice versa_. It has^20 According to Hector Hammerly (“Recent Methods and Trends in Second Language Teaching,” _The Modern Language Journal_, 55, December, 1971, p. 503) the dichotomy of habit formation versus cognitive learning, as established by some, is largely meaningless because they “neither exclude each other nor represent extremes in a spectrum.”

^21 Edgerton, p. 7

^22 Edgerton, p. 9
already been stated that accurate and explicit GD’s are often difficult to formulate and that many of those appearing in our textbooks are frequently fallacious or misleading (Cf. footnote 10). Our job and our future teachers’ job is to try to separate those which can be verified by the actual structure of the language, from those which appear to be empirically untenable.

The need to develop this kind of critical judgment in our future teachers should not be underestimated. 23 As teachers, we have too often accepted without question or skepticism what the “book” said. We must evaluate much more carefully some of those fossils that are copied from text to text, year after year, and ignore them if they fail the test. Then, if we can formulate something better, we do it; if we cannot, we simply do not give any GD but present and practise a larger amount of data hoping that the students will acquire the structure inductively. This is precisely what students can do in many cases, and often in spite of misleading or unsustainable grammatical generalizations.

Four general inferences can perhaps be drawn from this discussion:
1. The term “grammar,” the concepts for which it stands, and its objectives need to be better understood by teachers.
2. The grammatical coverage in our texts and its level of accuracy need to be re-evaluated and brought up to date.
3. The relative emphases in teacher preparation programs need to be re-examined.
4. An eclectic approach with broader liberal objectives and with less ambitious specific ones needs to be adopted by the profession.

Ultimately, the content of this paper may be interpreted as a partial account of current trends in language teaching for, as the rationalists seem to be gaining ground at the expense of the behaviorists, cognitive studies such as GD have been making a gradual, well-deserved, and fresh comeback and appear to be equipped, in many cases, with new insights which promise to rescue foreign language teaching from the sterile parroting of the sixties.

23 See Bull and Lamadrid, p. 454, and Di Pietro, p. 35, for related comments.

**Students Make the Scene**

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In contrast to the discouragement teachers encounter teaching the intermediate level of a foreign language, many find teaching first level as rewarding as teaching a baby to talk. Any utterance represents progress and accomplishment. Parents spend hours listening to the baby’s first word, and call Grandmother long distance so that she can hear it too. Teachers, in the same way, record, analyze, and reward beginning language students. Their achievement is pointed to with pure, unmitigated pride.

But, when a child gets to be four years old and tries to tell one of his ideas, it may take him a long, long time to retrieve the vocabulary he needs, or he may spurt out words that are not socially or linguistically acceptable. His ideas usually come out less imaginative than his grammar. Consequently, parents’ pride in a four year old’s speech is frequently mitigated by surprise, disappointment or even embarrassment.

**LANGUAGE IS SOUND** and language is symbol, but it is for communicating. Although people learn a language by making and recognizing sounds, and by distinguishing and memorizing symbols, they must go on to exchange ideas in the language to make it work for them.

Foreign language teachers agree with the principle, but many ask, “How?” “How do I find time to let students exchange ideas in class, and if I give them time how do I know that they will actually communicate?” “How, exactly, do I let students make the scene?”

Here are some ways to stimulate communication in a second language for students at the intermediate level. These practices will not only increase opportunities for student participation but may even prevent “second year” from terminating the student’s foreign language exposure.