Linguistics First, Then Grammar

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ATEG 2003
DRAFT

In many teacher preparation programs linguistics is now a required course, so the future teachers come away with an awareness of a descriptive approach to grammar, but then they are faced in the classroom with a set of standards and expectations that often conflicts with what they have learned about language. For example, though most teachers are certainly aware that our language has changed and will continue to change, it is difficult to maneuver around the change equals degradation myth because of the strong foothold that prescriptivism holds in our society and because of the traditional expectation that the English teacher will teach the standard.

Though many teacher education programs are now requiring some kind of linguistics courses for their future English and language arts teachers, this requirement has not transferred into new ways to teach about language and grammar, and we are still struggling with some basic questions with respect to what to teach about language in the K-12 classroom. For example, why are we still conflicted about prescriptive vs. descriptive or traditional vs. new grammar instruction? Why does grammar remain "the right way to talk", "proper grammar", "good English"? And why does grammar instruction so often exist in school only in relation to writing, punctuation, or usage?

I think we should begin to answer these questions by looking at the current state of grammar instruction as a good thing. It seems to be the consensus of those of us who teach grammar at the college level that most students come to us having had little to no grammar instruction. Given the way that grammar has traditionally been taught, it could be advantageous to have such clean slates. Much of the ATEG listserv discussion, for example, deals with "confusing terminology" and how often that terminology leads to confusion in an analysis. To give two recent examples:

Traditional grammar calls many strings following the verb "direct objects" that are, in fact, better analyzed as clausal complements.

(1) I complained <u>that it was hot</u>.

The underlined clause has been argued in some traditional grammar texts to be a direct object of the verb *complain*. But *complain* doesn't allow simple NP direct objects:

(2) *I complained the heat.

(3) *I complained the doctor.

And *that it was hot* fails other tests of direct objecthood, such as not allowing an adverb to go between the verb and its object and not passivizing. *Complain*, however has no problem with an adverb in between it and the complement clause *that it was hot*:

(4) I complained quietly that it was hot.

Also, (5) shows that *that it was hot* cannot passivize:

(5) *That it was hot was complained by me.

But compare:

(6) a. I felt the heat.

   b. The heat was felt by me.

The heat here is a direct object as illustrated by its ability to passivize.

Thus, there seems to be no benefit to calling the kind of clausal complement like *that it was hot* above a direct object and to do so can lead to confusion. Often, well-intentioned books and teachers attempt to simplify, but in so doing, ultimately make the students more confused and, importantly, perpetuate "grammar anxiety" when their students' intuitions seemingly fail them. However, the syntactic tests for direct objecthood are quite simple and provide students with a great deal of confidence rather than grammar anxiety. We want to give students the tools to experiment, test, and hypothesize, rather than making them memorize "rules" that then often don't work out.

Another example of how not having previous knowledge of grammar can be a benefit is the term *gerund*. I'm finding that in my classes fewer and fewer students know the term *gerund*, so when I introduce participial verb forms, I do not use the term at all and they willingly accept the different functions participial verb forms can perform—nominal, verbal, or adjectival. (There are typically a few students who know the term *gerund*—some understand it as being all *–ing* forms of verbs and others understand it as only those *–ing* forms that function nominally—so I simply explain how the term has been used historically and then say that we will not use it. Those that did know the term seem quite willing to abandon it.)

I use these two examples to show how we may be on better footing now than in the past to start fresh. If students don't know what direct objects or gerunds are to start with, well, then we're in better shape to introduce new terminology along with the concepts. Students come with little to no conscious knowledge of grammar and so are less likely to be perplexed by other analyses and conflicting terminology.[1]

So what can we do differently this time around besides eliminating confusing terminology? One of the main problems I see with some current grammar instruction (and I don't claim to have much direct knowledge at all about what goes on in K-12 classrooms except through what I'll discuss below), is that grammar, when it's taught at all, is taught in isolation, in the context of writing, or in Daily Oral Language lessons. I do not think that grammar instruction can truly take hold in our schools unless K-12 teachers talk directly with students about the historical, societal, and linguistic factors that play a role in our current understanding of *grammar*. It seems quite odd to me that schools (that is, education programs, certification bodies, whoever) have made the move to require teachers (at least English/language arts teachers) to take linguistics courses, thus acknowledging the importance of knowledge of language, at least indirectly, in the K-12 classroom,

but then they do not assume that the students need to know at least some of that same material. Pre-service teachers are taught about descriptive grammar, language acquisition, the nature of language variation and language change, for example, but they are then somehow supposed to figure out what aspects of "grammar" are relevant for their students to know, given what they, the teachers, now know about language. Is it wise to teach grammar—whatever one means by grammar—without imparting that same very basic and broader knowledge of the workings of language to one's K-12 students?

No. I think in order to teach grammar effectively, we must impart the other knowledge that we've been requiring teachers to know about language directly to the K-12 students, and it is only then—when grammar (and its multiple definitions) is studied "in context" of a broader knowledge of language and linguistics—that students can come to a fuller understanding and appreciation of it. For example, if students have knowledge of how language is acquired, of rules governing language variation and language change, of the history of prescriptive rules and standardization, of the role of the printing press, of the relationship between spelling and pronunciation, among other topics, then they have a much better context for understanding grammar in its many forms. And importantly, teaching students about descriptive grammar gives them confidence by showing them how much they already know about their language, about grammar.

My training is in theoretical linguistics—syntax—and though I enjoy the problem-solving and puzzles that my theoretical work allow, I have never liked working in a vacuum. I have sought out applications for my work in several ways: through psycholinguistic experiments (in which the theory gets tested by sentence-processing experiments), through work on little-studied Native American languages (which often provide new data that challenge the Indo-European-centric theories), and finally, and for me most importantly, through the classes I teach. To try to discover

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[1] It is important to make students aware that other terminology exists, however, so that they can use dictionaries,

which aspects of the often quite technical linguistic information are most important for my students—especially those that plan to become teachers—is quite gratifying. I teach linguistics in an English department. The introductory linguistics course is required of all English majors. The grammar class, called The Structure of English, is required of all secondary English education majors, though many other students take it as well. Because students other than education students take this—and because we only have 10 weeks to cover grammar—we cannot make this a grammar for teachers class. We teach them a descriptive approach to grammar and then they're on their own. I often wonder what my students who have this as background go on to do in their high school classes and I have begun to try to find out. I have found that much more linguistics is trickling into these classes than I thought, and perhaps less grammar than I thought.

I discuss below some of the ways in which my own students who have been trained in linguistics and now teach high school English have used their knowledge of linguistics in the classroom—both directly and indirectly—and what they are finding most important and relevant for their own students to know about language and grammar. From these field reports, I have begun to get a sense of what I believe to be the holes in the current system of our teaching preparation in linguistics and grammar, and I provide some suggestions—and seek your advice—about where we might go from here.

Here's an email message I received from a former student and current 9th and 10th grade English teacher, Angela Roh. Ms. Roh has some great ideas about how to bring linguistics and grammar into her classroom. She had several theoretical linguistics courses as an undergraduate, but no coursework on applications of that knowledge in her classroom—she did all of that on her own in what I think are wonderful ways. In response to a question from me about whether and how she

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handbooks, and grammar texts effectively.

brings her own knowledge she has acquired in linguistics courses into her own classroom, she offers

the following response:

> I try to bring linguistics into the classroom all the time; in small ways, every day
> and in more significant ways, as often as I can.
>
> Small ways:
>
> - reminding them about informal and formal registers in writing and in speech
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> - I broke out my book from my History of English class when a student asked
>   me what the style of English was called during the Puritan times, as they were
>   writing a newspaper for the Crucible.
>
> - with vocabulary, I always have the students deal with parts of speech and the
>   function of words in sentences to help them use the new words correctly and
>   to show them how much they already know about the parts of speech
>
> - they laughed at me for using *y'all*! Those stinkers! I explained to them using
>   French and Spanish (languages they are familiar with) as examples of why
>   using *y'all* is not only acceptable but really useful
>
> - same with using "they" as a referent to a nongendered, unspecified person; eg
>   *Someone called for you. Oh, really? What did THEY say?* I told my students to
>   use it but to be aware that there are old school grammarians out there that
>   will try to tell them that they are wrong. I explained the whole thing to them
>   so that they could have an argument ready for anyone who told them
>   different :)
>
> Big ways:
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> - When we read Langston Hughes, Mark Twain, etc. I usually give a lesson on
>   dialects in America and how they are a reflection of region or social group
>   and do not reflect intelligence or lack thereof. It's really interesting when the
>   students read the poem "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes and think that
>   because he says "life ain't been no crystal stair" that he is dumb and
>   uneducated. They are pretty much taken aback when I whip out my dialect
>   lesson and also inform them that Langston Hughes was college educated.
>   The dialect lesson gives them a richer appreciation for whatever we are
>   reading and also teaches them a thing or two about judging others. In
>   addition, it's also fun to say things like "chowda head" and tell them about a
>   teacher who says "caught" and "cot" as different words :) I also have the
>   kids examine their own dialect with this lesson and try to get them to
>   understand that if they were somewhere else in the US people might think
>   they talked weird too.

- when we do slave readings in American Lit, I talk about pidgins and creoles. And I will talk a little about Gullah when we read some Brer Rabbit.

- when we read Native American literature we talk about Native American languages in general (history, structure, etc.) and how those languages have influenced our own. The kids STILL say "habu" all the time and I have heard from other teachers that it has seeped into their classrooms as well![2]

I'm really not sure how linguistics could be irrelevant to teaching, especially English! We use it every day!

One of my biggest challenges as a high school English teacher is that when I get the kids, they really have no idea about grammar. Some of the kids even ask me what an adjective is! The focus in education these days is whole language and they really don't teach grammar much anymore. A lot of teachers focus on usage through Daily Oral Language (daily grammar exercises in which the students correct sentences and discuss the corrections).   But the days of graphing sentences are gone! I do wish, however, that they came to me knowing at least their parts of speech and how to analyze sentences.

I think it is fantastic the way that Ms. Roh teaches language knowledge "in the context" of so many aspects of her classes. She is empowering her students by showing them how much they know intuitively, by giving them tools to anaylze language. She is teaching them about dialects, language variation, language discrimination. Ok, so as a linguist, that's thrilling for me. But what about grammar? Ms. Roh herself laments the students' lack of conscious grammatical knowledge.

Do the kinds of discussions of linguistic knowledge that Ms. Roh offers her class make the class better able to deal with grammar? Yes, I think so. Any person by virtue of being a speaker of a language knows grammar. Imparting that knowledge to them—that is, the knowledge that they already have innate grammatical knowledge—is an enormous change from traditional approaches to teaching grammar that can effectively eliminate grammar anxiety and empower the students. We need to simply give students tools and terminology to access what they already know intuitively.

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[2] *Habu/haboo* is a word from Lushootseed, a Salish language, that used to be spoken all around the Puget Sound area where Ms. Roh teaches. It is a word used by the audience when listening to a story to indicate that they are listening, they are still awake, they are understanding.

There are lots of great ways to illustrate to students their incredible command of the grammar of their language. I'll include only a few here.[3] Brief discussions of these kinds of facts are a way of introducing "parts of speech" and "analysis of sentences", like Ms. Roh wishes for, earlier—in elementary school—in an effective, non-rote, relevant way so that when students get to a 9th grade class like Ms. Roh's, she can assume they have some basic terminological knowledge of certain core grammatical concepts.

Other former students have told me how they use the common *Jabberwockian*-style nonsense sentences to show students how they rely on their unconscious grammatical knowledge to identify the form and function of words.

(7) The froobling greebies snarfed the granflons that boofed nargily with great libidity.

This kind of example illustrates how we use syntactic and morphological tests for category identification intuitively and that we don't rely on semantic/meaning-based definitions. For example, instead of a noun being "a person, place, or thing", ask students how they can identify the nouns in a nonsense sentence like this one.

As a further illustration of the innate knowledge of categories, simply point out that no one "messes up" and uses, for example, an adjective where a noun is required. Consider the following sentences.

(8) a. I see beauty everywhere.

   b. I see beautiful things everywhere.

Although students may not always be certain of the labels for certain words, they would never misuse the words themselves in, for example, the following way:

(9) a. *I see beautiful everywhere.

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[3] Most introduction to linguistics textbooks have many examples of the kinds of unconscious knowledge we all have about our own languages.

b. *I see beauty things everywhere.

Now *beauty* may fail the person-place-or-thing definition of noun, but every speaker knows that it is a noun and uses it where they would use other nouns.
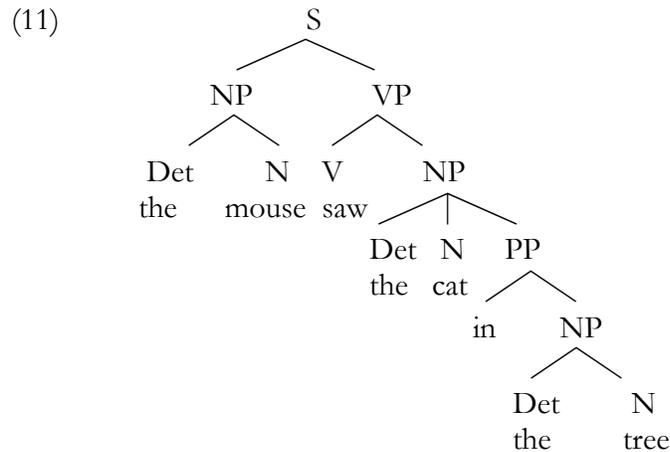
These kinds of tests are much more effective than the meaning-based cues. And then the "difficult" ones, instead of being problematic, can be used to discuss, not how there are all of these "exceptions" in our "crazy" language, but to show how language is changing, developing, living, and, importantly, how they have the power to make decisions about how to best analyze their language.

None of this is new. And none of this is difficult. And it is all the kind of material that could be introduced early, in elementary school. It seems to me that this kind of descriptive, tool-based approach to grammar would have the effect of making students more confident about grammar. It's the way we teach grammar in college and our students invariably say, "Why didn't we know this before?"

Another tool we use in our own university classes is tree diagrams. Also, many current university grammar textbooks make use of trees (including texts by Morenberg 1997, Lobeck 2000, Vaida 1996, Wardhaugh 1995, and Barry 1998) and thus their use seems to have been incorporated into many of today's university-level grammar classes. Though the use of trees might not be appropriate for early grades, I think their usefulness in grammar instruction is worth mentioning. I often have students tell me after my introductory linguistics class or my grammar class that they will use trees in teaching grammar in high school. Perhaps they're just trying to make me feel good, but I certainly find them useful as a tool to explain and illustrate grammatical concepts for my students, so why not for theirs? When we discuss syntax in my university introductory linguistics course, I tell my students that I will be talking as if I assume that they know (and/or remember) the parts of speech, but I also tell them that I realize that many of them don't have that knowledge. Then we move right into drawing syntactic trees in which they must label parts of speech, phrases, clauses, subjects, and
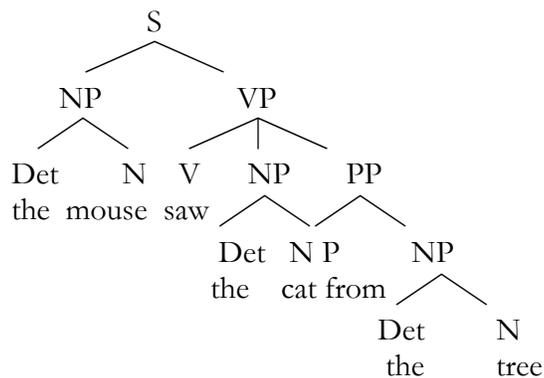
predicates. And mostly, they get it—they draw trees and find them useful. And again, they are

empowered. So much is captured in tree diagrams. Consider the following syntactic tree of the

sentence:

(10) The mouse saw the cat in the tree.

(11)
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                    S
             ┌──────┴──────┐
            NP            VP
          ┌──┴──┐      ┌──┴──┐
        Det    N     V     NP
        the  mouse  saw  ┌──┼──┐
                       Det  N   PP
                       the cat ┌─┴─┐
                              in    NP
                                  ┌──┴──┐
                                 Det    N
                                 the   tree
```

Not only does this kind of representation show parts of speech, but also syntactic phrases (and it

can be shown how these are innate conceptual units that we freely manipulate in our speech and

writing), subject and predicate, modification. To see how the modification of the PP can vary, see

the next sentence:

(12) The mouse saw the cat from the tree.

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                   S
            ┌──────┴──────┐
           NP            VP
         ┌──┴──┐      ┌───┼───┐
       Det    N     V    NP    PP
       the  mouse  saw ┌─┴─┐  ┌─┴──┐
                      Det N P    NP
                      the cat from ┌─┴─┐
                                  Det   N
                                  the  tree
```

Here the prepositional phrase modifies *saw*, not *the cat*, so it branches off of the phrase containing

the verb rather than the phrase containing the noun. This talk is not the place for me to defend the

use of trees. And I want to emphasize that syntactic trees should be used selectively. They are just another tool, not the end goal. Also, I'm not suggesting that anyone who has *not* had a linguistics class should start using trees in their high school classes. And I don't know that they would be particularly useful in early elementary school. But again, out future teachers at WWU have all used syntactic trees and we believe they are useful enough and important enough for them to use to help them understand the grammar of English. Why then should they not be used for their own high school students for the same purpose?

I also want to emphasize that, in general, I don't know what aspects of grammar should be taught at particular ages, but I do feel quite strongly that instruction in grammar should be in taught in the context of other linguistic knowledge in order to make it relevant and interesting and able to be retained. We have an opportunity now since most students are unencumbered by traditional grammar and many teachers have linguistic training. Each teacher may still have to figure out which aspects of the grammar of English it is important for their students to know, but it seems absolutely crucial for students to understand foremost how much they already know unconsciously and that they have complete command of the grammar of their language already. Then when grammar is taught in a *broad* context of other linguistic knowledge and when it is integrated into the various curricula from the beginning (as Ms. Roh does), students will be empowered to learn more, to think critically, and, I believe, they will learn grammar.

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