Grammar Revisited: Issues of Choice

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Abstract

The article reviews five interrelated areas that contribute to a view of grammar as a system of choices that language users make. Some of the grammar areas that are typically covered in English Language Teaching (ELT) are considered from the lens of Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis, Corpus Linguistics, Register and Genre Theory and Conversation Analysis. The overall objective is to suggest that a deterministic perspective on grammar rules should be combined with a probabilistic perspective that considers how language empowers speakers and writers to express nuances, stance and identity through grammar choices. The five areas reviewed are illustrated with traditional grammar points in ELT and suggestions are made for a pedagogy that incorporates an exploratory, awareness-raising approach to the teaching of grammar.
Keywords: grammar, probabilistic, choice, ELT pedagogy.

Resumen

En este artículo se plantean cinco áreas interrelacionadas que aportan a una visión de la gramática inglesa como un sistema de elecciones disponibles a los hablantes. Se consideran algunos puntos típicos del estudio gramatical desde la perspectiva de la pragmática, el análisis del discurso, la lingüística de corpus, la teoría del registro y género (*genre*), y el análisis de la conversación. El objetivo principal es sugerir que una perspectiva determinista de las reglas gramaticales debería ser combinada con una perspectiva probabilística que considere mecanismos por los cuales la lengua otorga a sus usuarios recursos para expresar matices semánticos, postura evaluativa e identidad, a través de elecciones gramaticales. Se ilustran las cinco áreas planteadas con puntos clásicos del estudio gramatical en las aulas de inglés como lengua extrajera, y se formulan sugerencias para una pedagogía basada en un enfoque exploratorio que apunte a generar conciencia en el alumnado de las opciones lingüísticas disponibles al usar el idioma inglés.
Palabras clave: gramática, probabilística, elección, pedagogía del inglés.

Introduction

In this article I will review five interrelated perspectives on grammar use and grammar analysis, and I will briefly suggest pedagogical implications for English Language Teaching (ELT)[1]. The perspectives can be said to be in opposition to the notion of grammar as a system of static, fixed rules. Needless to say, many rules, perhaps most, cannot easily be broken: *'Is name my Leandro' is ungrammatical to the extent that it can render communication very difficult, if not impossible.

Rules are therefore not only inevitable but indeed desirable. They frame communication to make it possible. Having said that, a certain tradition in ELT has usually preferred, perhaps still

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[1] This article is to a great extent inspired, as will become evident, in the work of Michael McCarthy and some of his colleagues and co-authors, such as Ronald Carter, David Brazil and Anne O'Keeffe. It is to Professor McCarthy's inspiration that I dedicate this paper.

prefers, to present rules in a watertight manner, math-style: Conditional sentences 1, 2 and 3. Yes, there is also *zero* and *mixed* conditional–but that is usually the extent of it. Those five options. Nothing beyond this "deterministic" view of grammar (McEnery *et al, 2006*).

Such a view may be inevitable when teaching a foreign language. Processes of learning must necessarily start easy before becoming complex. Pedagogic grammars often simplify the way language works to assist the learning process. It is our job as teachers to decide when we expose our students to what lies beyond grammar as a "linguistic straightjacket" (Larsen-Freeman, 2008), bearing in mind that "grammar affords speakers of a particular language a great deal of flexibility in the way they can express propositional, or notional meaning, and how they present themselves to the world" (p. 105).

This flexibility includes language forms which "deviate" from certain fixed rules. It is easy to explain these "deviations" as "exceptions" or "informal expressions"–which they sometimes may be. Oftentimes, however, the language user may be exercising the possibility, even the right, to convey semantic or pragmatic nuances that require other explicatory mechanisms, mechanisms that view grammar as a set of options from which speakers and writers can choose.

The Pragmatics of Grammar

An interesting area to begin illustrating grammar as a system of choices concerns the use of the *get*-passive. Linguists have never been content to assert that two language forms are synonymous or interchangeable, preferring to speak of "grammatical puzzles" (McCarthy 1998) that need disentangling. What can be said to be the difference between forms (1) and (2) below?

(1) a. They were robbed again.
    b. He was punished.
    c.   She was fired.
(2) a. They got robbed again.
    b. He got punished.
    c. She got fired.

An analysis of a large number of *get*-passives (2) revealed that *get* adds an extra layer of "problematicity" (McCarthy 2001), which may or may not be present in the basic forms with *be*. The situation in question is perceived as adverse or problematic by the speaker. In other words, it is the speaker's choice to present a situation as adverse. In the film *My Best Friend's Wedding,* the character played by Julia Roberts sends a false email which sparks off one of the conflicts in the film. When apologising for the problematic email, she explains: "I'm sorry-it wasn't supposed to get sent." Without a context, who could argue that "sending an email" is in any way problematic? It is the specific contextual configuration that leads to the perception that the action is adverse, which makes the apologetic friend choose the *get*-passive. "The email wasn't supposed to be sent" is perfectly grammatical. In fact, both forms can be argued to be *semantically* identical–but *pragmatically* different. Pragmatics adds the human, interpersonal component to the basic experiential, notional meaning which semantics studies (Yule, 1996, p. 4). It is the pragmatics of the utterance, with its added interpersonal nuance of "adverse, problematic", that explains why the *get*-passive may be chosen over the *be*-passive in the apology.

In the original research that I am reporting here (based on the CANCODE corpus, as used by McCarthy 1998, 2001), some 89% of the *get*-passives were analysed as problematic or adverse. The remaining samples in the corpus included good news instead, but with "a down-playing of self-praise when reporting success" (McCarthy, 1998, p. 84). A tennis player talking about his past successes explains that he "got picked for the county" (p. 85). Being chosen to play in a special team can hardly be seen as bad news. But this sort of sample still conveys stance: the expression of opinion, perspective or point of view, which is "inherent in verbal communication, (involving) our subjective and intersubjective side, as expressing a position with respect to a matter (which) is open to challenge by the others" (Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu *et al*, 2022, p. 1). When minimising (our

own) merit, we engage in *facework*. Face is usually defined as "every individual's feeling of self-worth or self-image; (an) image (which) can be damaged, maintained or enhanced through interaction with others" (Thomas, 2013, p. 169). It may be face-threatening (and therefore problematic) to assert "They chose me for the team", *vis-à-vis* "I was chosen" or, more face-saving in the sense of not wanting to come across as arrogant: "I got chosen." In other words, there may be a pragmatic layer of adversity involved even in the smaller percentage of findings that involve good news.

We can think of a gradient concerning our face wants (Yule, 1996, p. 61), in which the grammar choices vary from (potentially) more to less face-threatening, as observed in (3) to (5):

(3) They chose me for the team.

(4) I was chosen for the team.

(5) I got chosen for the team.

Examples of the *get*-passive abound in films, series, and of course "real life discourse." In the classroom, having guided students in working out this special nuance of the *get*-passive, we can invite them to find and bring to class their own examples. An alternative pedagogy to the more traditional "PPP" (Presentation-Practice-Production) may be especially useful for a more exploratory, collaborative approach to such linguistic nuances: I – I – I. This stands for Illustration-Interaction-Induction (McCarthy and Carter, 1995; Carter and McCarthy, 2015; Jones and Carter, 2015). Here the teacher shows examples of the language in question (Illustration), invites students to comment on any special features in a guided way, using L1 if need be (Interaction), and then encourages them to find their own examples (Induction), pointing out any subsequent uses–including any praiseworthy instances of the students' own output.

Another area worth mentioning where pragmatics meets grammar is non-restrictive relative clauses of the sentential kind (Biber *et al,* 2021), the kind that refers backwards to a whole idea or clause that has already been expressed. In line with the focus of this article, O'Keefe *et al* (2007, pp. 120-126) propose looking beyond the traditional (written-oriented, form-focussed) function of such clauses as "adding extra information." Seen from an *interactional* perspective, non-restrictive clauses, just like *get*-passives, in fact carry *a strong evaluative function*: speakers not only add information but also *evaluate* what was said before by using a continuative -*which* clause.

(6) I'm cooking this meal tonight, which I mean I don't mind at all, but I'm just such a bad cook. (O'Keefe *et al,* 2007, p. 123)

The sample above also shows the tendency for evaluative *which*-clauses to be surrounded by discourse markers[2] and other stance signals. The sample below shows the *which*-clause occurring across speaker turns.

(7) S1: But we were gonna leave Rob's car -

   S2: Yeah.

   S1: - in Manchester.

   S2: Right. I'm with you. Yeah.

   S1: So that we could pick it up on the way back.

   S2: Yeah. Right. Right. Right.

   S1: Which seemed a good idea at the time. (O'Keeffe *et al,* 2007, p. 125)

Examples such as these are rather common in speech, and are interesting in that they defy the more typical "single-author" use of a non-restrictive clause–the use normally found in ELT coursebooks, as pertaining specially to written discourse.

Besides the very useful function of adding extra information, which certainly helps both spoken and written discourse move forward, one classroom implication would be to raise our students' awareness of the evaluative function that the add-on *which*-structure can have in

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[2] See Jones and Carter (2015) for an interesting comparison between teaching discourse markers following a PPP versus an III methodology.

conversation, by reflecting on real data as shown above, and then generating moments (e.g., in role-playing activities) when students can be encouraged to comment on other students' contributions by adding (short) evaluative remarks that begin with *which*.

Questions of Discourse

An interesting area to understand how discoursal factors of context influence grammatical choices leads to a review of the classic Latin-based pronoun system: *I – you – he/she/it – we – you – they*. How useful is this system in a language like English, which has relatively little verb variation based on pronoun concord? Is it worth sustaining the pronoun paradigm if we consider that, other than third-person singular *does* (a rule that is known to be broken at times), English basically expresses tenses like the past in such a neat way?

(8) I went, you went, she went, we went, you went, they went.

With this in mind, McCarthy (1994) set out to study another set of pronoun choices, a triad in fact. He asked the question: What contextual factors may lead a language user to choose one pronoun over another in a sentence like (9)?

(9) The teacher left the room. *It / This / That* surprised anyone.

There is nothing ungrammatical about any of the three pronouns. The choice seems to reside in how the speaker projects the second utterance in relation to the first. The findings of a systematic analysis of pronoun use (McCarthy, 1994) revealed that *it* is simply continuative–it seems to be too weak, in fact, to refer backwards to items in previous paragraphs or sections rather than sentences. *This* has stronger referential force (stronger *deixis*, Brisard, 2012) and can therefore be more appropriate across such a section break, e.g., in written discourse. *That*, on the other hand, has been found to have a distancing effect–echoing the physical distance of *this book* versus *that book*, but in this case, in terms of psychological distance. Compare an effect such as "*This* is something I want to talk about–but I don't want to talk about *that*." McCarthy explains that "*this* signals a shift of entity or focus of attention to a new focus; *That* refers across from the current focus to entities or foci that are noncurrent, non-central, marginalizable or other-attributed" (McCarthy, 1994, p. 275).

Let us now turn to another grammar point that can be viewed from a discoursal perspective. If discourse has been defined as "language above and beyond the sentence" (Tracey, 2001, p. 726; Biber, 2012, p.193; Hart, 2018, p. 80), then finding patterns across sentences and identifying relevant grammar items that sustain those patterns is one of the significant contributions that discourse analysis can make to the teaching and learning of additional languages. One such pattern concerns the way that speakers reminisce about the past. Teachers often find this pattern surprising. When asked whether *used to* or *would* is more common when narrating sequences from long ago, the almost unequivocal answer is *used to*. Corpus findings in real spoken discourse show otherwise (McCarthy, 1998; Biber *et al*, 2021).

It appears that people narrating past habits tend to employ *used to* at the beginning of their reminiscing, as if to anchor the narrative frame clearly in the past–and then go on to employ a series of *would* forms to sustain it. The reason why the pattern may not be so obvious is that *would* will often be contracted, rendering the '*d* barely audible in connected, let alone quick, speech.

The pattern is common enough in interviews and films to be able to do the Illustration and Interaction phase in a classroom setting. As for Induction, students can be asked to narrate memories, starting with *used to* once or twice, then using a number of phrases with *would* (as well as other past tenses of course), in full or contracted forms.

The *used to – would* pattern is especially frequent in one particular register–that of conversation. The term *register* seems to have adopted a rather narrower meaning in ELT classrooms and materials ("the level of formality of discourse") than the actual meaning of the term in a more technical sense, at least in systemic-functional linguistics, where it is typically used to mean "a particular functional variety (of language) […], such as 'legal English'" (Halliday &

Matthiesen, 2004, p. 5). The meaning of *register* is therefore relatively close to *genre*: "different genres are different ways of using language to achieve different culturally established tasks, and texts of different genres are texts which are achieving different purposes in the culture" (Eggins and Martins, 1997, p. 236). Some authors actually use the terms somewhat interchangeably (see e.g., Lefer & Vogeleer, 2016). We now turn to ways in which grammar can be analysed from a register perspective.

Register-Based Grammar

One of my favourite "trick" questions when I do teacher workshops on grammar concerns the frequency of modal verbs. I ask: "out of the nine 'pure' modal verbs–those that do not take *to*– which do you imagine to be the most frequent?" I give teachers the nine verbs and give them a minute to rank them, thinking about their frequency of occurrence in both speech and writing: *may, should, shall, could, would, will, must, might, can.*

The answer appears to be elusive. *Will* (see Figure 1) sometimes does not even appear among the three top choices that teachers make. So accustomed are we to thinking of *will* as a future marker that it is easy to take for granted all the interpersonal potential of *will* in relation to volition, refusal, insistence, and so on. When we say something like (10) below, we are clearly not referring to the future, but the present instead–we may actually be including the past as well (and certainly projecting the car's stubbornness into the future!):

(10) The car won't start.

Now take this other utterance:

(11) I can't help her if she won't speak to me.

Looking at such an utterance, students (and teachers!) can easily wonder: whatever happened to the proscription of "not using *will* in the *if*-clause" of a conditional sentence? Is the rule being broken in (11) above? Is it a case of informal language use? An exception?

None of them. It is simply a relatively common (and idiomatic) way to say "she refuses to speak to me." For many of these "grammatical puzzles," therefore, it is our choice whether we use one of those comfortable, ready-made, one-size-fits-all answers (my personal favourite is "it's American," in cases when dialect has little to do with the analysis)–or whether we try instead to look at language in context. We can either create our own (small) corpus (for ways to do this, see Timmis, 2015; O'Keeffe *et al,* 2007), or else look at the work of authors who have already assembled and analysed one.
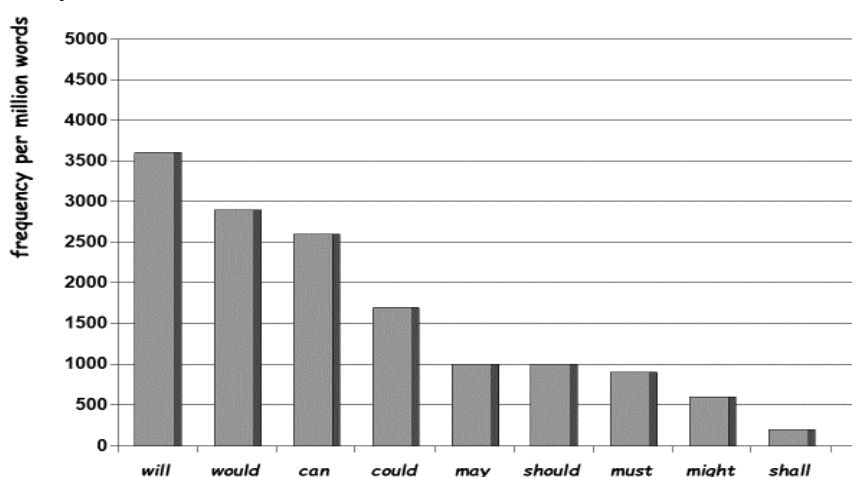

Fig 1. Frequency of occurrence of pure modal verbs across registers (Biber et al 1999: 486; 2021)[3]

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[3] The *Grammar of Spoken and Written English* was first published by Longman in 1999, later published by John Benjamins in 2021. The two are referred to in this article, somewhat interchangeably. The massive volume remains to this day, in both versions, one of the most comprehensive corpus-based grammar accounts available, although it is essentially a reference book rather than a

This leads to the actual register-based question, which I ask during teacher workshops after the 9-verb quiz: *In which of these four broad registers are modal and semi-modal verbs more frequent? More importantly, why are modals and semi-modals (including forms such as* be supposed to, *even* be going to*) more or less common in each of these macro-registers: News / Conversation / Fiction / Academic*?

As figure 2 shows, (semi-)modal verbs are much more frequent in conversation. This is the register in which stance-taking is the most relevant (Biber *et al*, 1999), as is the need to hedge our ideas, to make them softer or less forceful, when we take care of the facework often involved in spontaneous conversation. This finding has important implications for course design: we should make sure to include a range of modality expressions in a conversation class, as a higher priority than, say, in an academic writing course, where modality will certainly be present, but to a lesser extent–in fact, for other uses. Designing courses and planning lessons can (should?) hardly be done anymore without reference to corpora. It is the link between grammar and corpora that we will explore next.
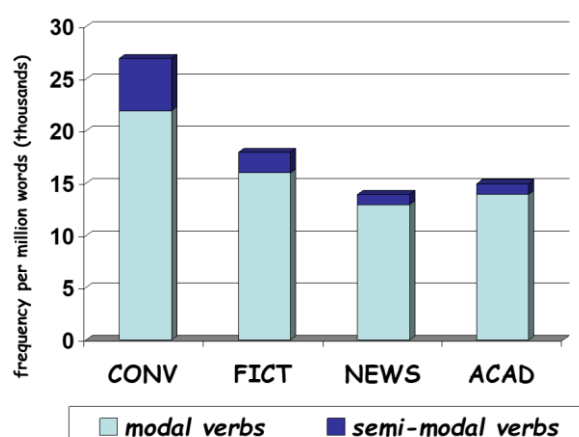

Fig 2. Modal and semi-modal verbs: Frequency according to register (Biber et al 1999: 486; 2021

The World of Corpora

The previous discussion introduces the importance of corpus findings for language study and grammar teaching. It is becoming increasingly difficult to think of teaching a language, including grammar, without considering the ever-increasing corpora that are being produced, which have important implications for how we view, teach and learn languages. Computer technology is essential in corpus studies, initially "simply as a tool, later […] not only was it providing an abundance of new evidence, it was by its nature affecting the methodological frame of enquiry by speeding it up, systematising it, and making it applicable in real time to ever larger amounts of data." (Bonelli, 2010, p. 17).

The growing body of literature comprises corpus-based analyses and applications not only of written discourse (e.g., Sinclair and Carter, 2004) and spoken discourse in both monomodal and multimodal approaches (Adolphs and Carter, 2013) but also corpus-based approaches to discourse analysis (Friginal and Hardy, 2021). Of particular interest to teachers are books such as *Corpus Linguistics for ELT* (Timmis, 2015) and *Corpus Linguistics for Grammar* (Jones and Waller,

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pedagogical guide. The 1999 edition later had a shorter version published: *Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber *et al,* 2002), with an accompanying workbook. Another excellent corpus-based grammar, which does present pedagogical implications, is McCarthy and Carter (2005), the *Cambridge Grammar of English* (CUP).

2015), both of which discuss research and practice linking corpus linguistics with ELT and grammar.

Every point in this article so far has been directly or indirectly related to corpora, so here we will add a simple definition, and one more language area to discuss applications of corpora to ELT. A corpus can be defined as a collection of texts, written, spoken or multimodal, assembled in such purposeful ways (Timmis, 2015) that conclusions can be drawn in terms of how frequent language times are, in which kinds of texts, and with which kind of linguistic behaviour. O'Keeffe et al (2012) give three basic features for a corpus: it is a collection of electronic texts usually stored on a computer; it is a *principled* collection of texts (emphasis added); it is available for qualitative and quantitative analysis (p. 1-2).

The area to be reviewed here from a corpus perspective could easily have been a section in itself: lexico-grammar (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2004). Grammar is nothing without lexis. Lexis often cannot go very far without grammar either. Convenient as it may be, the ELT tradition of having separate lesson phases and book sections for grammar on the one hand, and vocabulary on the other, does little to reflect real language use. It is worth considering ways in which grammar and lexis may be studied together. Lexical bundles can be one such way.

Lexical bundles, and related ways of referring to such phrases, like lexical chunks (Davis & Kryszewska, 2012), or lexical clusters (Pace-Sigge, 2013), can be "regarded as extended collocations: bundles of words that show a statistical tendency to co-occur. […] They are much more common than idioms […] and they deal with the lexical end of grammar, [an] approach [that] can open our eyes to an aspect of language we often ignore: grammar is not just a study of abstract classes and structures, but of particular words and their particular functions within those classes and functions" (Biber *et al*, 2021, p. 981).

A brief section such as this can hardly do justice to the enormous area of lexical bundles. Suffice it to review here a couple of interesting corpus findings that can hopefully invite further scrutiny, extracted from Chapter 13 in Biber *et al* (1999; 2021). Comparing conversational (12) versus academic registers (13), lexical bundles are slightly more frequent in the former, although of course the actual bundle type differs quite markedly in each register:

(12)   do you want me to   going to be a   I said to him
(13)   in the case of the   there was no significant   it should be noted that

Three-word bundles are especially frequent in both registers, almost ten times as frequent as 4-word bundles. 5-word and 6-word bundles are considerably less frequent and often made up of two shorter bundles, e.g*., do you want; you want me; want me to; me to do*:

(14)   *Do you want me to* (5-word bundle)

In conversation, one of the 14 major bundle categories is *personal pronoun + lexical verb* phrase, as in *I know* or *I think* extended by a complement clause: *I don't know whether; I don't know why; I don't think so; I thought it was*, etc. Most bundles in this category are first person pronoun plus stative verb, extended into phrases that "seem to function as utterance launchers, presenting a personal stance relative to the information in the following complement clause" (Biber *et al*, 1999, p. 1003). These launchers often take negative or past verbs:

(15)   **I don't think I** could handle it. **/ I thought he was** going for three weeks.

This view of grammar has important implications for ELT practices: almost 45% of the words that occur in conversation appear in a lexical bundle. Given that class time is limited, taking a good look at the frequency of language items in general, in this case lexical bundles, can help us to prioritize what we devote time and energy to in the classroom.

Coordinated binomial phrases are another interesting area: two words from the same category coordinated by *and, but, or*. The combination verb + verb (e.g., *wait and see*) is especially common in conversation, unlike news and academic prose, registers in which this particular combination is rare. "*Go* + verb" is especially common in conversation: "*go and see / go and get*" have over 40 occurrences per million words; "*go and have / go and do*", over 20 per million. In

American English *and* is often missing. Especially common in this dialect are *go see, go get, go look, go do*.

Linking grammar and lexis in this way is "important for the learner of English as a foreign language: producing natural, idiomatic English is not just a matter of constructing well-formed sentences, but of using well-tried (cf. David Brazil's "used language," 1995) lexical expressions in appropriate places" (Biber *et al,* 1999, p. 990). Importantly, students should learn lexical bundles as a unit, pronouncing them "in one go," for example as if each bundle were a (long) single word. This is what characterizes bundles as such: they seem to be stored as single units in the brain (Tremblay *et al*, 2011).

This emphasis on conversation anticipates our last section: grammar from the perspective of spoken discourse.

The Grammar of Speech

Language has historically been studied from a written-discourse perspective. Many scholars have aimed to redress the balance in recent years and decades by focusing on spoken English (see e.g., Hughes, 2017, for a lucid account of research and teaching implications, including project work that teachers can do). Most references and authors cited in this article, if not all, belong to this shift in paradigm. In this last brief section, we will review two grammar processes which respond to the logic of studying spoken discourse in its own right, not simply as a more informal variety of written discourse (McCarthy *et al*, 2010).

Let's start with the difference between samples (16) and (17).

(16)   Mary's right / The pasta's cold / The film was brilliant.

(17)   She's right Mary / The pasta it's cold / It was brilliant the film.

The sentences in (16) look correct. The ones in (17), possibly not–until we think of them as utterances, rather than sentences.[4] Said out loud, the utterances in (17) will probably contain discourse markers, pauses, question tags, possibly even intonation patterns that are different from those in (16) (Thornbury & Slade, 2006). The sentences in (16) are more "writerly" to begin with (Carter, 2012): no intonation need be ascribed to them. Because writing can only approximate what happens in speech, a rendering of (17) as they are likely to occur in actual (spoken) discourse might be:

(18)   a. She's right, you know – Mary

b. The pasta… mm it's cold I'm afraid

c. It was brilliant, wasn't it, the film…

Special punctuation (commas, dashes, suspension points), and the markers and tags mentioned above, can usually help to show in writing a number of essentially spoken choices which tend to surround this special word order which has received different names in various grammar models. In formal linguistics, it has often been called dislocation (Shaer *et al,* 2011): left dislocation ("The pasta, it's cold") and right dislocation ("She's right, Mary"). These terms, however, may reveal a certain written-English slant: anything that is "dislocated" needs to be put back where it belongs. It is not quite its place to be there. Also, in spoken discourse, there is no "left" or "right", only "before", "now" and "after." A search for alternative terms has generated *heads* (or *headers*) and *tails* (McCarthy and Carter, 2015); or *prefaces* and *tags* (Biber *et al*, 1999; 2021). To recap, each process can receive the names between parentheses below, either starting with a noun (phrase), which is then re-thematised with a pronoun, or the other way about–a message that begins with a pronoun, which is later clarified with an actual noun (phrase).

(19)   **The pasta**… mm it's cold I'm afraid (head, header, or preface – in bold)

(20)   It was brilliant, wasn't it, **the film**… (tail, or tag – in bold)

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[4] The terms "sentence" and "utterance" may be seen to be used rather interchangeably, here and elsewhere. In general, "sentence" refers to written discourse; "utterance," to spoken discourse.

It is beyond the scope of this article to go into fine detail as to the discoursal and sociopragmatic features of *heads* and *tails*. Suffice it here to say that heads are strongly textual: they thematize a reference, which is then picked up by a pronoun that makes the actual comment about the theme. Tails have a tendency to appear in stance-taking utterances (Carter, 2012).

The reason why it is important to work with grammar areas such as *heads* and *tails* in the classroom (ideally following a methodology like I-I-I, as reviewed above) is that they offer an alternative to the written-based canon of "correct" word order and grammar processes. There is nothing "incorrect" about these "dislocated" word orders: They are legitimate processes through which speakers signal what the focus of their message is, prior to actually delivering the message (heads), or reinforce a reference already given in case it has been vague or ambiguous while they make an evaluative comment (tails).

To conclude this section, we will briefly review an area of spoken English which may be seen as the confines of grammar as a system of choices: vernacular grammar. *Vernacular* can be considered as a near synonym of *non-standard*: In fact, as Biber *et al* (2021) explain, "the terms (…) can be used more or less interchangeably, except that 'non-standard' is more negative and perhaps misleading in suggesting a clear-cut dichotomy between the two varieties of language: one which matches up to the 'standard' and one which does not. The notion of 'standard' English is, in fact, itself problematic in talking of the spoken language" (p. 1116).

In exploring the language forms below, teachers are often somewhat baffled, especially because the expressions are frequently called "common errors" in ELT classrooms. These forms, however, relate to speaker identity. They are typical of certain regions in the English-speaking world and as such have much to contribute to a sense of (speech) community.

For questions of space and length, only two examples will here be given of each of the four vernacular phenomena that Biber et al review (2021, p. 1116, ff).

Morphophonemic variants
>   (21)   The reduced possessive adjective *me* /mɪ/ instead of *my* /mɑɪ/:
>   *That's what me Mum always said* (BrE).
>   (22)   The reduced pronoun /jə/ (sometimes spelt *ya*) instead of *you*:
>   *Nice seeing ya* (AmE).
>   (Other forms: *see 'em* / *drinkin'*)

Morphological variants
>   (23)   *Y'all* and *yous* for second personal plural pronoun forms:
>   *For once in your lives can yous be nice in this* house (BrE; especially Northern Ireland).
>   *Come back up here, right now, all of yous* (AmE; especially north-east).
>   (24)   Regular past forms made irregular, or vice versa:
>   *My brother drug me out to run* (AmE) (Cf. dragged).
>   (Other forms: *ain't* / *innit*)

Morphosyntactic variants
>   (25)   Using past participle for simple past, or vice versa, with certain common verbs:
>   *Oh, I've forgot someone's hat* (BrE)
>   *I just come up here to see uh somebody called Dora* (AmE)
>   (26)   Adjective forms used as adverbs:
>   *Yeah, but then I wanted to go back so bad* (AmE).
>   *Oh you're awful warm* (AmE).
>   (Other forms: verb variation such as *I says* / *My legs was hurting*.)

Syntactic variants
>   (27)   Double or multiple negation:
>   *Don't say I never gave you nothing* (AmE).
>   (28)   Double comparatives:

Sometimes, that is so, so much more easier to follow (AmE).

Interestingly, one same speaker may switch from one form to the other even in a short stretch of discourse:

(29)   By the way you was going, dude, you were setting 'em up (AmE). (Biber *et al,* 2021, p. 1118)

In the ELT classroom, we should make a double point: all such vernacular forms may be "felt to lack prestige and to be inappropriate for serious public communication, especially written communication," as much as they are "highly prized because of their role in establishing and maintaining social solidarity among the speakers in selected groups, and in bringing vigour and colour into speech style, […] especially (in) ethnic and regional dialect forms" (Biber *et al,* 2021, p. 1115).

Weaving the threads together

Grammar is not just about right and wrong. It involves several other factors as well: appropriateness, identity, even personal preference. Personal choice.

You may have seen me make the occasional "speakerly" choice in this article, for example, even if the text is rather formal and technical–the last sentence in the previous paragraph for example, which is often not even considered a sentence, since it lacks a subject and verb. (Look back at paragraph two in the introduction for more such "indulgences").

The fact that I am using *you* and *I* is also a choice I would not ordinarily make in academic writing, because of the register itself, and for personal preferences. It is because I have conceived of this text as a "reflective article," one of the sub-registers that the *Argentinian Journal of Applied Linguistics* accepts for publication, that I have given myself permission to make such choices of "tenor" (Hasan, 2009): reciprocal signals which at least I would find too strong and involved in other kinds of academic writing. Tenor is certainly another area to approach from an I-I-I perspective in ELT classrooms, regardless of age or level of the students–for example, by analysing the presence or absence of overt first and/or second person signals in a text.

By reviewing the five interdependent perspectives in this article, I have attempted to present grammar as a set of choices available to speakers (and writers) from a set of rules that cannot necessarily be broken. In other words, it is important to decide which rules or language forms are "deterministic," and which ones "probabilistic" (McEnery *et al*, 2006). The latter may require different explicatory mechanisms from those usually employed in ELT. Although the research I have reviewed spans at least a quarter of a century, the principle of "grammar as choice" has not necessarily found its way into ELT classrooms or materials, certainly not as far as section headings in books, tables of contents and other ways that may give it visibility as teaching or learning priorities.

Ronald Carter in private correspondence and Michael McCarthy in an interview that I had the pleasure to have with him (13 October 2020, available on YouTube) coincided in suggesting that "traditions die hard." It is neither easy nor quick for research to enter the playing field of classrooms. Nor would materials necessarily become very popular if they suddenly had sections such as *head*s, *tails* or *vernacular grammar*, which even in their names may fall outside of the comfort zone of teachers or other professionals in charge of materials selection.

Teachers who usually follow only a *deterministic* way to present language rules to students may want to explore options to incorporate a more *probabilistic*, awareness-raising approach, for example by following the I-I-I pedagogy reviewed in this paper. This could entail a slow path of linguistic and pedagogic (self- and re-) discovery, which may be undertaken by looking at some of the works and authors mentioned in this article. The path may lead to subtle, yet important, modifications in the way we view and teach grammar, and language as a whole.

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