

DESIGN CRITERIA FOR PEDAGOGIC LANGUAGE RULES

Introduction: pedagogic and non-pedagogic rules

In this paper, I shall discuss the characteristics which distinguish pedagogic language rules from other kinds of language rule. By ‘pedagogic rules’ I mean rules which are designed to help foreign-language learners understand particular aspects of the languages they are studying (whether these rules are addressed directly to the learners, or to teachers and materials writers who are expected to pass on the rules to the learners in one form or another, is immaterial). I shall refer to a collection of such rules, unoriginally, as a ‘pedagogic grammar’. This term can also reasonably be applied to a collection of rules designed for students who are learning about the structure of their own language, and much of what shall I have to say is relevant to mother-tongue language instruction.

‘Pedagogic’ rules can be more or less pedagogic. At one extreme, we can conceive (with some idealisation) of a rule designed for one specific learner, whose background, stage of development and preferred learning styles are all known. (This is the kind of rule that a good teacher might aim to give to an individual student.) Such a rule would probably be very different from a standard reference grammar’s description of the same linguistic facts. At the other extreme is the type of broad-spectrum rule which one might find in a pedagogic grammar designed for teachers and advanced students from a variety of backgrounds; rules of this kind do not always differ in many respects from the equivalent non-pedagogic descriptions.

Implicit in this discussion is the belief that pedagogic rules can be useful to language learners. The question is notoriously a controversial one: it is of course possible that teaching language rules contributes nothing to learners’ development. This issue is, however, outside the scope of my paper.

Six criteria

Assuming, then, for the sake of argument, that language rules are useful to learners, good rules must be more useful than bad rules. But what makes a ‘good’ rule? I believe that one can identify at least six ‘design criteria’ for pedagogic language rules: *truth, demarcation, clarity, simplicity, conceptual parsimony and relevance*. (Not all of these terms are transparent, but I hope that the following discussion will make it clear what I mean by them.) The first three criteria are relevant to any kind of rule, while the others are especially important to the design of pedagogic rules. Some of them overlap; none the less, I feel that they are sufficiently distinct to merit separate consideration. Not all of them are compatible; indeed, I shall argue that some of the criteria necessarily conflict.

Truth

Rules should be true.

It is obviously desirable to tell learners the truth. However, as Oscar Wilde said, the truth is rarely pure and never simple: it can be difficult to be sure exactly what the facts are, and to decide how much of the truth to tell. This criterion, therefore, is likely to conflict with others, and one will often need to compromise with truth for the sake of clarity, simplicity, conceptual parsimony or relevance. All other things being equal, though, it is best if language rules correspond reasonably well to the linguistic facts; since grammarians are fallible human beings like everybody else, this does not

always happen. Readers may like to decide what is wrong with the following rules, taken from well-known pedagogic and general-purpose reference works. (For comments, see the end of the paper.)

- 1 The past tense refers to a DEFINITE time in the past.
(Leech and Svartvik 1975)
- 2 *In case* is a subordinator referring to possible future conditions: *Do this in case a fire breaks out* means ‘Do this in the event of a fire breaking out’. However, in British English *in case* in this sentence could also have the meaning of negative purpose: ‘Do this to prevent fire breaking out’.
(Quirk et al. 1985)
- 3 Unlike the simple genitive, the double genitive usually implies non-unique meaning ... Compare:
He is my brother (suggests I have one, or more than one brother)
He is a brother of mine (suggests I have more than one brother)
(Leech and Svartvik 1975)
- 4 When the main verb of a sentence is in a past tense, verbs in subordinate clauses must be in a past tense also.
(Thomson and Martinet 1980)
- 5 The plain infinitive is used with *had better*; *had rather*; *had sooner*.
(Zandvoort 1957)
- 6 Spelling: *-ise* and *-ize* ... It is safer to write *-ize*: with a very few exceptions, this is always correct.
(Swan 1984)

In the interests of telling the truth, a pedagogic grammarian must of course try to suppress his or her own prescriptive prejudices and resistance to language change. One may for instance personally disapprove of the use of *like* as a conjunction (as in *It looks like the tickets are sold out*), or one may feel that many people use *hopefully*, *refute* or *disinterested* in undesirable ways, but one is doing no service to learners by telling them, as some writers do, that such things are incorrect (though one may well want to point out that some people believe them to be so). If educated native-speaker usage is divided, the grammarian's job is to describe and account for the division, not to attempt to adjudicate.

Demarcation

A pedagogic rule should show clearly what are the limits on the use of a given form.

Telling the truth involves not only saying what things are, but also saying what they are not. If you ask me what a pika is, and I tell you that it is small and furry, has four legs and is found in the United States, you have grounds for complaint. My answer is descriptive, in that it gives you some accurate information about pikas, but it has no defining or predictive value, because it does not enable you to distinguish between pikas and other creatures such as squirrels, martens, weasels, prairie dogs, chipmunks, moles, rats or cats. If I want to do better than this, I must, so to speak, demarcate the territory occupied by the concept of 'pika' from that occupied by similar concepts, by telling you what makes pikas unique.

In the same way, a pedagogic rule, however true and well-expressed, is useless unless it demarcates clearly the area within which a given form is appropriate, so that a learner will know when to use the form and when not to. Here is an example of a rule that does not meet this criterion.

The PERFECT OF EXPERIENCE expresses what has happened, once or more than once, within the speaker's or writer's experience.

(Zandvoort 1957)

One can see what Zandvoort has in mind, but his description does not distinguish between different ways of talking about ‘experience’, and so fails to provide a basis for *predicting* whether or not the present perfect will be appropriate in a given case. As formulated, in fact, Zandvoort’s rule could be interpreted as meaning that one uses the present perfect to refer to everything that has happened in one’s lifetime!

Here is another rule which fails to demarcate.

The present perfect continuous tense ... This tense is used for an action which began in the past and is still continuing, or has only just finished.

(Thomson and Martinet 1980)

What is said here is perfectly true, as well as being admirably clear and simple. The problem is that the present perfect continuous is not the only verb form that is used to talk about actions which began in the past and are still continuing. The present continuous is also used for this purpose – much more often in fact than the present perfect continuous. The rule does not list the features (e.g. specification of duration) which demarcate the use of the present perfect continuous from that of the present continuous, and so provides no basis for predicting which of the two forms will be appropriate in a given case.

The demarcation criterion is particularly important, and notoriously difficult to satisfy, in pedagogic lexical definition. Learners of English often have enormous difficulty in distinguishing close synonyms such as *evil* and *wicked*, *box* and *tin*, *shut* and *close* or *begin* and *start*. Dictionary definitions do not usually help – indeed, ordinary dictionaries are not designed to settle demarcation disputes between synonyms. (One of the learner’s dictionaries on my shelf defines *evil* as ‘causing harm and morally bad’, and *wicked* as ‘immoral and harmful’; the others do no better.) Perhaps as computerised corpus studies make more usage data available, it will at last become possible to give really helpful rules about the distinctions between words.

Clarity

Rules should be clear.

Teachers tend to be good at making things clear. Their professional training and experience make them skilled at presenting information in an orderly fashion, using examples constructively, putting proper emphasis on what is most important, eliminating ambiguity, and so on. Modern pedagogic grammars, which are often written by people with teaching experience, do generally put things clearly, and it is much easier to find rules that are clear but untrue than rules which are true but unclear.

Where rules are unclear, it is often because of the use of unsatisfactory terminology, and this may conceal the fact that the writer does not himself or herself really understand the point at issue. Vague terms like *emphasis*, *definite*, *habitual*, *pronoun*, *condition*, *modality* or *style* can give the illusion of explanation without really conveying very much. When formulating pedagogic explanations, it is always worth asking oneself if one *really* understands exactly what is meant by the terms one is using; and assuming one does, whether one’s audience is likely to understand the same things by them as one does oneself.

Here are two examples of rules where the writer has perhaps failed to put a premium on clarity.

The perfect verb form usually denotes an action that falls within the time-sphere of the present.

(Zandvoort 1957)

La modalité est le filtre coloré de notre subjectivité, au travers duquel nous voyons le réel. ('Modality is the coloured filter of our subjectivity, through which we perceive reality.')

(Charlot, Hocmard and Morgan 1977)

Zandvoort's time-sphere and the French authors' filter are both striking images, but neither of them successfully conveys the relevant information to someone who does not already possess it. After studying these rules, the learner is no better able than before to make valid choices of tense or modality. (How can we decide, after all, whether a given past action is 'within the time-sphere of the present' or whether facts that we wish to refer to are or are not seen through the 'coloured filter of our subjectivity')? The concepts are evocative, but they simply do not have enough precision to give them predictive value. Perhaps metaphors are better avoided in pedagogic grammar.

Simplicity

A pedagogic rule should be simple. There is inevitably some trade-off with truth and/or clarity. How much does this matter?

Simplicity is not quite the same thing as clarity (though it may contribute to it). Clarity, as I have used the term, relates above all to the way an explanation is worded; simplicity to the way it is constructed. Clarity is the opposite of obscurity, and means the avoidance of ill-defined concepts and vague or misleading terminology. Simplicity is the opposite of complexity – simplifying a description involves trimming it to make it more manageable, for example by reducing the number of categories or subdivisions or by leaving out inessential details.

One of the things that distinguish pedagogic rules sharply from general-purpose descriptive rules is the requirement that they be simple. The truth is of no value if it cannot be understood, and since ordinary language learners tend to have limited prior knowledge and are not usually natural grammarians, some degree of simplification is nearly always necessary. In addition, clear and simple rules are psychologically valuable: they make students feel that they can understand and control the very complex material that they are faced with. How much one can reduce complexity without excessive distortion is a matter for individual judgement: one person's skilful simplification is another person's irresponsible travesty, and teachers' journals are consequently full of articles in which pedagogic grammarians take each other to task for giving over-simple rules of thumb. In some cases, of course, a point of grammar may be so complex that a successful simplification is actually impossible: there are aspects of language which cannot be taught (though they can be acquired).

The following rule, on article usage, seems to me an excellent example of a carefully-thought-out trade-off between truth, clarity and simplicity.

The best simplification is that the form of the article is determined by the interplay of the features 'definite' and 'known to the listener', thus giving four possible realisations:

- 1 Both definite and known to the listener » *the*
Look at the sun!
- 2 Definite but not known to the listener » *a/an*
I passed through a village.
- 3 Indefinite but known to the listener » *the/a/0+s*
The lion is dangerous.
A lion is dangerous.
Lions are dangerous.
- 4 Neither definite nor known to the listener » *a/an*

If a person wants something ...

(Todd and Hancock 1986)

Some clarity has been lost in the simplification – *definite* is not explained, and *known to the listener* is used as something of a catch-all term. The authors have also cut one or two corners – in particular, they have decided not to deal with the use of articles to make *general/specific* distinctions. But what is left gives a good deal of the truth about the use of articles, and gives it in a form that makes this very complex point accessible to the average advanced student or teacher.

Here is another impressive simplification, from an article on teaching the present perfect.

We often think that there are endless rules for this tense. In fact these can be boiled down to just two simple precepts:

1. To describe actions beginning in the past and continuing up to the present moment (and possibly into the future): *I've planted fourteen rose bushes so far this morning.*
2. To refer to actions occurring or not occurring at an unspecified time in the past with some kind of connection to the present: *Have you passed your driving test?*

Every use of the present perfect (for example with *since, for* and so on) will fit into one of these rules. Proliferating rules without end makes this tense sound more difficult than it actually is.

(Alexander 1988b)

Whether or not a particular simplification is valid depends ultimately on who it is addressed to, how much they already know, how much they are capable of taking in, and what value they and their teachers place on complete accuracy. None the less, one can reasonably ask whether Alexander, excellent pedagogic grammarian though he is, has not on this occasion paid too high a price for simplicity. It is easy to share his impatience with the jungle of rules that are often supplied in a desperate attempt to pin down the use of the present perfect. On the other hand, the point *is* a difficult one; that is why grammarians make such heavy weather of it. (Defining the use of the present perfect is rather like trying to fit a balloon into your pocket – as soon as you manage to get one bit in, another bit bulges out again.) It is interesting that, in his *Longman English Grammar* (1988a), Alexander actually devotes quite a lot of space – over 140 lines – to the point. In comparison, *Cobuild* (Sinclair 1990) has 58 lines and Greenbaum and Quirk's *Student's Grammar* (1990) has 80. Thomson and Martinet (1980), locked in a fight to the death with this most elusive of usage questions, have over 380.

Conceptual economy

An explanation must make use of the conceptual framework available to the learner. It may be necessary to add to this. If so, one should aim for minimum intervention.

Simplicity and clarity may not be enough. One can drastically reduce the complexity of an explanation, use terminology that is perfectly precise in its reference, and still be left with something that is difficult for the non-specialist to grasp. When new information is communicated, there is often a conceptual gap between writer/speaker and reader/listener. Not only does the former know more than the latter; he or she may also analyse the material using concepts and categories which, though clearly defined, are unfamiliar to the recipient. In order to communicate effectively, it can be important to take into account the conceptual framework available to one's reader or listener, and to try to work within this as far as is reasonable. If the way in which one

analyses a topic is too far removed from the analysis which one's audience initially brings to it, communication is likely to break down.

A professional grammarian writing for colleagues or well-informed amateurs does not of course need to make too many concessions to this principle of conceptual economy. He or she can assume that most readers will be familiar with the concepts and terminology used; if they are not, they can be expected to do the work necessary to grasp precisely what is meant by, say, 'theme and rheme', 'ergative', 'raising' or 'NP-trace'. On the other hand, a pedagogic grammarian or a teacher giving learners a rule can usually assume very little conceptual sophistication on the part of his/her readers or listeners. He or she must try to get things across using the simplest possible grammatical notions. Terminology will be chosen for its familiarity rather than for its precision. It will sometimes be necessary to provide students with new concepts in order to get a point across, but one must aim for minimum intervention. This will often mean compromising – perhaps quite seriously – with the truth.

Which of the following rules is more likely to be understood by the average learner?

1. We use *much* with uncountable nouns and *many* with plural countables.
2. We use *much* with singular nouns and *many* with plurals.

It seems to me that, in this instance, the added precision gained by referring to countability is not worth paying for, unless the student to whom the rule is addressed is already totally familiar with the concept. (Students who can distinguish between singular and plural are unlikely to try to use *much* with countable singulars anyway, because phrases like *much horse* do not make sense, so 'singular nouns' will effectively direct them to uncountable nouns in this case.) Similarly, one might (possibly gritting one's teeth) decide that it was more cost-effective with a particular student or class to talk about 'possessive adjectives' rather than 'possessive determiners', 'infinitive' rather than 'base form', 'tense' rather than 'tense plus aspect', or 'conditional' rather than '*would + infinitive*', however unsatisfactory these labels might be from a strictly descriptive point of view. (If one's students speak a language in which the equivalent of *would go* is an inflected verb form with a name such as *conditionnel* or *condizionale*, it is surely perverse not to use the cognate term when talking about the English structure.)

Relevance

A rule should answer the question (and only the question) that the student's English is 'asking'.

Pedagogic grammar is not just about language; it is about the interaction between language and language learners. A good pedagogic rule does not present a neutral analysis of a set of linguistic data; it answers a question, real or potential, that is asked by a learner, or that is generated by his or her interlanguage. Consider the following concocted examples.

- 1 My sister Ksenija lives in Belgrade. She is hairdresser.
- 2 My sister Marie-France lives in Lyon. She is hairdresser.

Despite the surface equivalence, the two instances of 'She is hairdresser' can be seen as reflecting totally different interlanguage rules. In the first case (given the fact that Slav languages have no article systems), the learner's interlanguage rule – if this sentence is typical of his/her usage – might be paraphrased as 'There are no indefinite articles in English' or 'English articles are too hard to understand, so don't use them'. The second learner's interlanguage rule is more likely to be something on the lines of 'Articles are not used in English before classifying complements such as the names of professions'. In a teaching situation, one could regard each of the sentences as generating a question, or a request for a rule: respectively 'How are (indefinite)

articles used in English?" and 'How does English article usage differ from French in the case of classifying complements?'. Clearly the pedagogic rules that will be appropriate in each case will be totally different one from the other. While the Serbian speaker will need a good deal of information about the meaning and use of the English articles, there is no point in giving a French-speaking learner a similarly complete account, since he/she already knows in general how article systems work.

The following rather fanciful examples show how failure to produce an English plural inflection might reflect four different interlanguage rules (so that four different pedagogic rules would be potentially relevant to the correction of the mistakes).

- 1 *I run an import-export business in Taipei with my two brother.*
(Chinese does not inflect for number.)
- 2 *I run a carpet factory in Teheran with my two brother.*
(Farsi nouns inflect for number, but singular forms are used with numerical determiners.)
- 3 *I run a call-girl network in Dijon with my two brother.*
(Although written French commonly adds -s for plural, like English, the -s is not pronounced. This carries over into the spoken English of French-speaking learners, and – because of subvocalisation – quite often into their written English.)
- 4 *I run a brewery in Heidelberg with my two brother.*
(Many German nouns form their plural by adding -er; many others have both singular and plural in -er. German-speakers quite often drop -s off the plurals of English words ending in -er: presumably this is because the ending already 'feels plural' to them.)

Because it is important to focus closely on a learner's point of difficulty and to exclude information that is irrelevant to this, it can sometimes be useful to present what is, objectively speaking, a thoroughly bad rule. Conditional structures are a case in point. The standard pedagogic analysis of sentences with *if* into 'first', 'second' and 'third' conditionals is, from a strictly descriptive point of view, total nonsense. (All sorts of possible combinations of verb forms are possible with *if*; in so far as it makes sense to categorise them, they can more usefully be divided into two main groups – those with 'ordinary' tenses, and those in which 'special' tenses are used to express a hypothetical kind of meaning.) However, given that students do tend to have trouble with the three structures that are presented in the standard pedagogic analysis, and that they can generally manage the others without difficulty, one could argue that – whatever its theoretical defects – this analysis gives students what they need.

Similar considerations apply to the teaching of indirect speech. This is very nearly a pseudo-category in English. Despite the monstrous apparatus of rules about backshift, deictic changes and so on that appear in many pedagogic grammars and course books, nearly all English indirect speech utterances are constructed in accordance with the general rules that determine the form of most other English sentences. A few kinds of indirect speech sentence do involve tense usage that is specific to this grammatical category (eg *Are you deaf? I asked you how old you were*), but these are the exception. On the other hand, indirect speech is very definitely a live category for many learners of English, either because in their languages it does follow special syntactic rules, or because their mother-tongues have no equivalent of the structure at all. This being so, it may after all be appropriate for a pedagogic grammar to provide a full-scale account of indirect speech as a separate topic, even if this would arguably be out of place in a purely descriptive grammar.

Failure to focus on the learner's linguistic state as well as on the language itself is responsible for a good deal of bad grammar teaching. In old-style mother-tongue

English lessons in secondary schools, a great deal of emphasis was put on parsing: identifying parts of speech and their syntactic roles, labelling clause types and so on. This effectively amounted to saying ‘Their grammar is defective; therefore we must teach them grammar’, without consideration of whether the grammar they were allegedly getting wrong and the grammar they were being taught bore any relation to each other. But there is not much value, for instance, in teaching people to identify noun clauses, if the ways in which their language is unsatisfactory do not include failure to operate the category of noun clauses. This is like saying ‘Jake got lost on the way back from the pub last night; he needs geography lessons’ or ‘Annie put salt in her tea this morning instead of sugar; she needs chemistry lessons’ or (in the immortal words of *Yes, Minister*) ‘Something must be done; this is something; therefore let us do it’.

Effective grammar teaching, then, focuses on the specific problems (real and potential) of specific learners. This will necessarily mean giving a somewhat fragmentary and partial account of the grammar of the target language, rather than working through a ‘complete’ grammar syllabus giving ‘complete’ rules. There is nothing at all wrong with this, though the approach may look messy and unsystematic: the grammar classroom is no place for people with completion neuroses. To quote a very apposite old American saying: ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’.

Crossing linguistic categories: grammar, lexis or pragmatics?

When we formulate fine-tuned pedagogic rules, the need to focus on the learner as well as the language not only affects the shape of the rules; it may even determine whether a particular language element is seen as involving grammar, lexis or pragmatics. Consider the various possible ways of handling *because*-clauses. In a general-purpose reference book, these will be unambiguously classified under grammar. Whether a pedagogic rule treats them as grammar, however, will depend on who the rule is for. A learner whose language does not have clause subordination – or does not express cause through subordination – will certainly approach *because*-clauses as an aspect of grammar. But a speaker of a European language is likely to have few problems with simple subordination; for such a student, the relevant information about *because* will be that it is the equivalent of *weil*, *parce que*, *porque*, *fordi*, *potamou sto* or whatever. He or she will learn *because* as a vocabulary item, and may well need no grammatical information at all in order to begin using it correctly. Or consider ways of asking for help. For some learners, the English use of a negative declarative question structure to make requests (as in *You couldn’t give me a hand for a minute?*) will correspond closely to what happens in their own languages, and their task will be the relatively simple one of mastering the English version of the form. For speakers of other languages, in contrast, the very fact of asking for help by means of a direct question may be quite alien, so that they will not only have to learn a new point of grammar – how to construct this kind of interrogative – but also an aspect of pragmatics – how to associate questions with a new kind of speech act. In pedagogic grammar work, therefore, the very way in which items are assigned to linguistic categories may depend as much on what the learner knows as on the structure of the target language.

Conclusion: in defence of rules of thumb

‘School grammars’ is a term that is often given a pejorative edge (sometimes with good reason). But it is easy to forget what it is like to know little about a subject and to have little aptitude for it. People who are inclined to be dismissive of popular

pedagogic grammars might usefully consider in what form they themselves would like to be given information about quantum mechanics, laser technology, plant genetics, crystallography or the physics of black holes. A little truth goes a long way when one is off one's own ground.

Teachers often give students explanations of a kind that they would not dream of producing if an inspector was in the room. And yet the teacher's corner-cutting rules of thumb, half-truths and unscientific terminology might on occasion work better than anything that the inspector would be capable of. Good teaching involves a most mysterious feat – sitting, so to speak, on one's listener's shoulder, monitoring what one is saying with the listener's ears, and using this feedback to shape and adapt one's words from moment to moment so that the thread of communication never breaks. This is art, not science, and there is a great deal of such art in the production of successful pedagogic language rules. These rules may on occasion be very different from those found in a standard reference grammar; but it may be this very difference – the fact that they satisfy specifically pedagogic criteria such as simplicity, conceptual parsimony and relevance – that makes them succeed where more descriptively 'respectable' rules would fail.

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NOTES ON THE QUOTATIONS UNDER 'TRUTH'.

- 1 What is a 'definite' time? How definite is 'once upon a time'? How about 'an indefinite time ago'? How about 'Nobody knows when ...'?
- 2 Suppose you insure a house in case fire breaks out. This doesn't mean either 'in the event of fire breaking out' or 'to prevent fire breaking out', but '*to guard against the consequences of fire breaking out*'.
- 3 What about 'How's that brother of yours?' The 'non-unique' meaning in Leech and Svartvik's example comes from the indefinite article, not from the 'double genitive', whose function is simply to circumvent the English constraint on the co-occurrence of possessives with articles and demonstratives.
- 4 This is only true of certain kinds of subordinate clause in certain kinds of structure.
- 5 *Had rather* lives on in grammars, but is virtually obsolete in normal usage.
- 6 For British English, the opposite is closer to the truth.

