The Case against Abstract Grammar: Against Non-Communicative Grammars

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A grammar that is not intimately connected to communication is highly artificial and abstracted from anything that could describe or produce human language behavior (Pennington, 2002). Yet in both (i) the traditional models of language that inform the grammars which most language teachers and students are familiar with and (ii) the formal models that inform the grammars of mainstream linguistics, the facts of performance and interaction are commonly mentioned only in passing and at worst relegated to a realm which is entirely outside that of grammar or language itself.

Since the reason for language to exist is communication with other human beings, a grammar which does not start from the social features of communication, on the face of it has low validity as a model of language. Formal syntax, in being referenced to abstract, unverifiable cognitive structure (e.g. Chomsky, 1995), is far removed from performed, communicative language and so cannot in any obvious way serve as a model of it. If one argues, as formal linguists do, that the reality of language is its mental existence, e.g. in cognitive categories and abilities to make grammaticality judgments, one must nevertheless ultimately show how this internal language relates to external, performed language. In spite of its postulation of interfaces with surface forms, formal linguistics, after more than a half century of development, is still very far from making this connection, which requires linkages of speaker, hearer, and context.

Speakers construct their utterances in relation to their own purposes and intentions; their knowledge of communicative context, including what the hearer can be presumed to know; and their knowledge of contextual effects (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). An everyday example of communication involving an imaginary, gender-neutral speaker and hearer, Pat and Marty, who live together, can demonstrate this. Imagine that it is Saturday morning. Marty is making coffee as Pat goes to the corner news agent and buys a newspaper. After returning, Pat opens some letters that have just arrived before going in. One is a letter offering a much hoped-for
job Pat has applied for. Pat comes into the kitchen holding the newspaper and several pieces of mail and says, *I got it!* Marty, who is facing the sink, turns around, looks over at Pat, and immediately puts on a big smile and replies, *Fantastic! I knew you would!* They hug and talk excitedly about the future, and decide to go out for breakfast to celebrate.

How is it that when Pat enters the kitchen and says those three little words, *I got it!* Marty knows right away that Pat has been offered the job applied for? A main reason is the intonation. Pat does not merely state *I got it* but rather exclaims this with high key, thereby narrowing down the context of assumptions to one contrasting with all other possibilities (Brazil, 1997). This exclamation leads Marty to realize that Pat is not talking about the routine process of buying a newspaper; and the fact that Pat is holding some opened pieces of mail gives Marty another important clue. The communication is realized by means of (i) the specific speaker’s selection of (ii) tonal pattern together with (iii) specific words and (iv) their arrangement within that tonal pattern, given (v) the specific context and (vi) the intended audience, as exactly the right language to trigger the intended interpretation. Only tradition would make one argue that the syntactic pattern or lexicogrammar of the utterance is the primary feature of this communication to which all other features are referenced.

This everyday example demonstrates that language is necessarily contextual and social and must be referenced to the joint actions of at least two people (Clark, 1996). It thus makes a good case that a grammar developed apart from communicative function, as has long been the approach of traditional grammar and the mainstream linguistics formalist tradition, misses crucial facts about how language works and so has limited utility as a model of language.

**References**


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**About the Author**

Martha C. Pennington is Professor of Writing and Linguistics at Georgia Southern University (USA) and Editor of the journal *Writing & Pedagogy*. She has published widely in TESOL and applied linguistics, including *New Ways in Teaching Grammar* (TESOL publications, 1995) and *College Writing Toolkit* (forthcoming with Equinox, co-edited with Pauline Burton).