

Statement and comments to questions submitted to the conference round table (R. Funke, February 5, 2021)

Statement responding to the question 'What grammar content should be taught?'

The basic development of debates with respect to the contents of L1 grammar teaching has not been limited to a specific region; it was international. The story goes like this: Instead of teaching predefined tenets about language, students were encouraged to discover grammar independently. Also, instead of restricting the contents of grammar teaching to language structure, language use was made a topic too. This started in the 1970ies; the new approach was labeled 'reflecting on language' or the like.

Of course, this is a story. One wonders whether this actually happened in classroom practice. Nonetheless, I will stick to the curricular perspective here, and I would like to add two observations.

- (a) In Germany (as well as in the Netherlands and in Austria), the enriched grammar curricula in the sense of reflecting on language and language use have been evaluated in large-scale surveys. There are some results suggesting that the attainments students are expected to reach are not the same across subdomains; so, the curricula seem to be heterogeneous. In other words, it would be illusory to expect that the curricular reform automatically led to better learning progress.
- (b) The increase of migration has resulted in a development which, to some extent, runs counter to the story as described above. For migrant students, grammar teaching must include not only learning about language but also language learning. Importantly, it became obvious that the same applies to at least some students whose L1 is the one of grammar teaching.

Given these observations, I think that, in research, grammar in the narrow sense, i.e. teaching aimed at metasyntactic learning, should keep on the agenda. I would suggest that this is where regional perspectives come into play. For differences between languages may lead to variability in the view of grammar teaching. The German writing system (and others, such as the French one) draws heavily on morphosyntactic distinctions. Capitalization of nouns is the most prominent example. One might consider that even spoken language seems to be more driven by morphosyntax in German than, say, in English. For instance, in English you can say 'A group of students met in front of the university. *They were* discussing about ...'. In German, you could express this the same way; but in addition, it would also be possible to say 'A group of students met in front of the university. *It was* discussing about ...'. In other words, the morphosyntactic singular 'a group' survives even across a sentential boundary. With respect to the said features, one might call German a morphosyntactically marking language.

If you are a literate speaker of a morphosyntactically marking language, you may tend to believe that, whenever you talk or write, you are 'grammatizing', i.e. bookkeeping about morphosyntax. If so, you may still be undecided about which contents to include in grammar teaching or even about whether L1 grammar teaching should happen at all. However, you will not doubt that there is an

'object' of grammar learning, viz. the web of overt or covert morphosyntactic indicators you spin when you talk or write.

If one takes a research perspective (not a programmatic perspective), the question about which contents to teach should not be the only one, and not even the primordial one when thinking about the agenda of grammar teaching. A more relevant issue to consider is which type of access students have to the 'object' of grammar teaching. This is what many students struggle with. So, in my view, grammar teaching should be designed so as to offer support to students to reliably access syntactic patterns.

Comment on the question 'Which role should grammar have in teacher education?'

The grammar knowledge of teachers and preservice teachers has gained prominence within the past 5 or 10 years. A comprehensive review of international research about the topic would be highly welcome.

I think that the recent development found in teacher education makes apparent a shift in the basic approach taken in L1 research. Instead of evaluating pre-planned lessons, researchers now look at fine-grained elements of teaching practice which are supposed to impact on learning, such as

- explaining concepts,
- taking up questions,
- inspiring dialogues.

These are processes where teachers' knowledge and skills are at stake. The reason is that it is not possible to anticipate in advance all the chances and pitfalls which might surface when a teacher engages in them. So, these processes should, in my view, determine the agenda of teacher education regarding grammar. Skills which grammar education for teachers should focus on are, among others:

- identifying conceptual gaps in explanations,
- recognizing where grammar issues are at stake,
- feeling comfortable with discussing unresolved questions.

Grammar education in preservice teachers' education should not consist in amassing grammar content knowledge.

I would, however, caution that one should scale down one's expectations. Drawing on my personal experience as a teacher educator, I think that some people have a hard time accessing grammar. Empirical surveys in Germany suggest that the grammar knowledge which preservice teachers acquire in university courses is limited. Still, one does not know to what degree it is possible to increase it.

Comment on the question 'Should grammar be taught for its own sake?'

As an individual, I feel that grammar knowledge is valuable for me. This, however, is a personal view. So, I hesitate to adopt the general idea that grammar should in be taught for its own sake. There are two reasons for that.

First, if you were a decision maker in curriculum issues, I guess many people would tell you that teaching some specific knowledge is definitely needed. This, however, would not necessarily set you in motion – even if, in principle, you agree with the proponent's view. In curricula, time and space will never suffice to teach all the knowledge which is needed. So, being needed is no reason to select a specific piece of knowledge for inclusion in the curriculum. This may seem paradoxical or even absurd at first sight. However, actually it just mirrors the *condition humaine* which determines our lives – that is, human beings' learning will always lag behind what they need to learn.

Second, as a warrant for the idea that grammar should be taught for its own sake, it is sometimes compared to content area instruction, e.g. biology. The argument goes like this: No one doubts that students should learn about, say, blood circulation. This is true even though knowing about blood circulation does not make your blood circulate better. Why should grammar be treated differently from biology? I wouldn't adopt this argument because I doubt that the comparison it starts from is appropriate. As for biology, there will be some students who value it, and there will be other students who find it boring. However, all of them will be able to understand what biology is about. As for grammar, there seem to be students who simply don't get the point what it's about. With respect to this, one might compare grammar to music rather than biology. There are some people who are unable to reliably reproduce basic rhythmic patterns. As a consequence, a melody is an elusive object for them even if they can hear it when it is presented to them. For such people, acquiring knowledge about music would amount to acquiring knowledge about nothing. The reason is that it would be knowledge without an object which it refers to. This is what, as I believe, happens some people with respect to grammar.

Having said this, I would like to add that, nevertheless, it would be inappropriate to look at grammar from a purely 'instrumental' point of view. Notably, in research the question of the instrumental use of grammar teaching has been equated to its causal role in fostering linguistic growth. This, however, is short-sighted in my view. To illustrate: If you have children, you will, from time to time, have to buy them new shoes. This is not because the shoes cause their feet to grow; rather it is the other way round: Their growing feet make you buy the shoes. Nevertheless, buying the shoes contributes to your children's development because it enables them to make use of their grown feet. They may discover new ways of climbing, running or dancing which are tailored specifically to the shoes as well as vice versa. Had you not bought the shoes, their feet might as well have remained as small as before. Turning back to grammar teaching, this means that grammar having a functional use in peoples' lives must not be equated with its acquisition being causally related to the development of linguistic skills.