Book review

Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English

Review of Douglas Biber, Stig Johannson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad and Edward Finegan, Pearson Education Limited, Harlow, 1999. xxviii+ 1204 pages

What on earth, you might ask, could be the relevance of a grammar (of all books) to the readers of a *Journal of Pragmatics!* By way of a first answer, consider the following set of extracts from the last and most interesting chapter of this grammar: "The important point about tag questions, here, is that they add an interrogative force to a declarative one [...], thus illustrating the characteristic 'negotiation' or **co-construction** of meaning between interlocutors" (p. 1046; original emphasis); "it must not be supposed that conversation preserves polite norms all (or even most) of the time" (p. 1047); and "the evidence of repeats confirms that speakers have to plan hardest when embarking on major syntactic units, including finite clauses and full noun phrases" (p. 1059). Is this, both in content and tone, what you would expect to find in a grammar?

Apparently then this is not a 'normal' grammar, in the conventional sense of 'a book that describes the rules by which words are combined into sentences'. The *Longman grammar of spoken and written English* (LGSWE) has more highflying ambitions, and these focus on its empirical basis and the functional approach taken. "The goal throughout the grammar is to describe the ways in which speakers and writers *actually use the grammatical resources available in the English language.* These descriptions document *the frequency and discourse functions* of each grammatical feature" (cover blurb; my emphasis). In actual practice, this means that reports of frequency counts of grammatical features are given which have been retrieved from a purpose-designed corpus of English taken from two media (spoken and written), four registers (conversation, fiction, news and academic writing) and two national varieties (American and British English). The frequencies of lexical and grammatical features are provided in tables and accompanied by discussions of their functional motivations. The announcement in the cover blurb does **not** mean, however, that LGSWE has a functional basis in its descriptive framework and overall organization, comparable to Leech and Svartvik's *Communicative Grammar of English* (1994) or Sinclair's **COBUILD** grammar (1990). The descriptive and terminological framework of LGSWE is largely borrowed from the *Comprehensive grammar of the English language* (Quirk et al. 1985; 7), and its overall structure is—with notable exceptions to be discussed—quite conventional.

LGSWE falls into five large sections. In the introductory Section A the corpus-based quantitative approach is explained. The inclusion of four different registers is

seen as reflecting the authors' concern with the "situational characteristics" (p. 9) of different text-types. In contrast to other grammars, as is emphasized, "L G S W E is concerned with the grammatical *and discourse factors* that relate to the choice among structurally and semantically related variants" (p. 14; my emphasis).

The next three sections follow the traditional arrangement from "Basic grammar: description and distribution" (Section B, pp. 47-226) to "Key word classes and their phrases" (Section C, pp. 227-569) to "More complex structures" (Section D, pp. 571-892). All these sections include informed and convincing functional interpretations of findings from the corpus on the frequencies of grammatical features. The discussions are concerned with "(1) the **work that a feature performs** in discourse; (2) the **processing constraints** that it reflects; and (3) the **situational** or **social distinctions** that it conventionally indexes" (p. 41; original emphasis). It is obvious that considerations of this type are more likely to strike a chord with linguists with a functional bent than would the run-of-the-mill grammatical description. The functional perspective can be gleaned, for example, from such basic distinctions as the types of word classes proposed. In addition to the usual macro-classes of lexical and functional words, L G S W E has a third basic type called *insert,* which comprises interjections, greetings and farewells, discourse markers, attention signals, response elicitators, responses, hesitators, thanks, apologies, expletives and the politeness marker *please* (p. 93 f.). Another good example is the treatment of anaphoric expressions as part of an "overview of nominals in discourse" (230 ff.). After brief passages on the role of nominals in establishing reference and creating chains of reference, the reader is provided with quantitative findings on and interpretations of the forms of anaphoric expressions and the distance to their antecedent or "nearest previous mention" (p. 239). While of course a grammar cannot go into the intricacies of anaphoric reference, it is encouraging to see that data and analyses of this type have found their way into *grammatology* (as Quirk calls the discipline in his foreword). On the downside, scant attention is being paid to the rather traditional grammatical function 'expression of future time'. Not even as much as half a page is devoted to "the marking of future time" (p. 456), while the treatment of the formal means of expressing reference to future time is scattered over such sections as aspect and modality. To some extent, this reflects a force antagonistic to the functional tendency of the grammar, viz. the form-orientation brought about by the practical need to make the most of automatic, and thus form-based, searches. This may well be one of its more disappointing features - especially for teachers of English as a second or foreign language, who are mentioned in the list of potential users of the book (p. 46).

The most interesting section from a pragmatic point of view is clearly Section E "Grammar in a wider perspective" (pp. 893-1125). This falls into four chapters: "Word order and related syntactic choices" (Ch. 11, pp. 895-964), "The grammatical marking of stance" (Ch. 12, pp. 965-986), "Lexical expressions in speech and writing" (Ch. 13, pp. 987-1036), and "The grammar of conversation" (Ch. 14, pp. 1037-1125). I will focus on Chapter 14 here, because it is the most innovative part of the book.

Chapter 14 must be evaluated in the context of numerous other recent treatments of grammatical aspects of spoken English such as Carter and McCarthy (1988), Fox

and Thompson (1990), Lerner (1991), Miller (1995), Ochs et al. (1996), and Miller and Weinert (1998). Like many of these (and earlier) publications on spoken English, Chapter 14 of L G S W E begins by putting the grammar of spoken English into a contextual perspective. The basic functional, situational and cognitive circumstances of the production of spoken language are outlined, and their most important linguistic reverberations are explained with reference to a transcript of a short informal chat: conversation tends to take place in a shared context, using the spoken medium; it is carried out on-line, in real time and in an interactive way; it avoids elaboration and specification of meaning, uses a fairly restricted and repetitive repertoire, and includes markers of politeness, emotions, and attitude. Attention is drawn to the relations between basic processing factors like capacity-limitations of short-term memory and the need for on-line planning, on the one hand, and linguistic features such as average clause-length on the other.

Then hesitations, "repeats", repairs, incomplete utterances and syntactic blends are discussed under the heading "Performance phenomena: dysfluency and error" (p. 1052 ff.). This is remarkable from a theoretical perspective, since it shows that a grammar of conversation does not have to surrender to the fragmentation of spontaneous speech with a fatalistic 'anything goes'. Although incomplete utterances and anacolutha are fairly common in spontaneous conversation, it appears that even a purely descriptive approach can afford to take recourse to the, especially in pragmatic circles prohibited, term *performance error* and exclude such features from the grammar. In this section, as in many other places in the book, the frequencies of features obtained from the corpus allow the researchers to provide fresh and strong evidence for long-standing intuitions and gut feelings. For example, unfilled pauses and repeats are observed to occur particularly frequently before major syntactic units like clauses and full noun phrases. This indicates that they reflect particularly effortful planning phases (cf. the third quotation given in the first paragraph of this review). Pauses filled with *uh, er, erm* etc., on the other hand, are differently distributed. They are more commonly found at the ends of units, where they tend to function as floor holders.

Next, the chapter embarks on an account of "the constructional principles of spoken grammar" (p. 1066 ff.)—a quite daunting task, as many of us know. Three basic principles are invoked to explain the fragmentary nature of the grammar of speech: "keep talking", "limited planning ahead", and "qualification of what has been said" (p. 1067). While these principles are not formulated in a particularly consistent or, for that matter, clear way, they account for such common and disparate phenomena as back-tracking and re-starting, grammatical incompleteness, parenthetical structures, the principle of end-weight, and what is termed the "add-on strategy" (p. 1068). Since we have to keep talking (first principle), but have little chance to plan ahead (second principle), it is often necessary to "modify the message retrospectively" (p. 1067) by tagging on afterthoughts and qualifications (third principle).

The final step before a functional grammar of conversation can be proposed is the introduction of so-called "C-units" (p. 1069 ff.). C-units are "syntactically independent pieces of speech" (p. 1070). The most important aspect of C-units is that they can be realized either as clausal units or as such non-clausal units as elliptical questions or

answers, interjections, discourse markers, backchannels etc. The idea is that although non-clausal C-units are grammatically incomplete, they are used in conversation as syntactically independent chunks.

C-units are LGSWE's answer to a notorious problem: does spoken language consist of sentences, and if not, what are its largest independent units (cf. e.g. Miller, 1995)? Does the answer solve this problem? Ultimately it does not, because it transfers the crucial problem of the delimitation of syntactic units to the question as to how a chunk of language can be determined to be "syntactically independent". Nevertheless—and it should be recalled that a grammar is not the place for in-depth theoretical treatises—C-units turn out to be useful in the description of the structure of composite utterances, which represents the hub of the grammar of conversation.

Composite utterances, the spoken counterparts to "the architecturally integrated sentences of written prose" (p. 1072), are said to consist of *prefaces, bodies,* and *tags. Prefaces* typically fulfil the function of launching utterances by means of devices like fronting, topicalized noun phrases, utterance-initial discourse markers, or so-called *ouvertures,* i.e. longer preposed expressions like *the trouble is ...* or *I'll tell you what...* They tend to be realized by non-clausal units. *Bodies,* on the other hand, typically consist of one or more clausal units. Presumably since they are explicable in the framework of written grammar rules, little more is said about bodies in LGSWE. Finally, *tags* tend to consist of one or more non-clausal units and reflect the add-on strategy mentioned above. Among the kinds of tags discussed are question tags, retrospective comment clauses (... *I don't think),* retrospective vagueness hedges (... *in a way),* and vocatives (p. 1080 ff.). A typical example of a composite utterance is *North and south London* (preface) *they're two different worlds* (body), *aren't they? in a way* (multiple tags) (p. 1072).

This section of LGSWE thus achieves mainly three things. First, it provides a general framework for the grammatical description of utterances; second, it introduces three independent functional constituents of utterances; and third, it relates the latter to formal realizations, on the one hand, and discourse functions, on the other. The third step includes a detailed account of types of the above-mentioned *inserts* and other, syntactically longer, non-clausal units and their main functions. The crucial theoretical step forward lies in the introduction of *non-clausal* C-units as grammatical units that are at the same time syntactically independent and grammatically incomplete. While this move does not ultimately solve the theoretical problem as to how the characteristic 'syntactically independent' can be defined and delimited, to this reviewer it appears to be an elegant way of keeping the lid on the Pandora's box that is liable to spring open the moment one invokes the notion of *sentence* in the description of spoken language.

The rest of Chapter 14 (p. 1108 ff.) deals with selected topics in conversational grammar: vocatives, conducive *yes-no* interrogatives, first person imperatives with *let's,* direct speech reporting and vernacular or non-standard grammar. No more will be said about these sections here.

LGSWE is clearly a fascinating book. One can of course react to its preoccupation with the corpus method and frequency counts by saying that most of the quantitative findings do no more than confirm long-standing intuitions. But this misses the point

for three reasons: firstly, to collect objective empirical evidence on such a large scale is a valuable aim in its own right, because the data can serve as reference points for further in-depth studies; secondly, the quantitative findings are not left standing on their own but are accompanied by plausible and often illuminating functional inter-pretations; and thirdly, in some cases the quantitative findings have helped to open new perspectives on old questions. The most innovative and refreshing part of L G S W E is the chapter on the grammar of conversation, which was therefore discussed in greater detail in this review. Carved out from the grammar as an autonomous volume, this chapter would serve as a valuable book-sized contribution to a modern and hotly-debated field of research. It does not a come as a surprise to read in the Preface (p. vii) that the responsibility for this achievement lies in the hands of Geoffrey Leech.

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