PRACE NAUKOWE Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie
Studia Neofilologiczne 2013, z. IX

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COGNITIVE ENGLISH GRAMMAR AND TEACHING ENGLISH

Abstract

The aim of the article is to present some ways of aiding traditional approaches to teaching English grammar with the cognitive one. The present author concentrates on improving teaching in such areas as (un)countability, articles or tense. The article relies on the research carried out by Berezowski and Bielak and Pawlak.

The Polish education system has gone through many changes that have been implemented regularly since 1999. Books, exams, teaching methods, both teachers and students have changed much. Teaching English has not been outside the process. That is why emphasis on speaking and understanding a foreign language has never been stronger. The only aspect of language that has resisted a faster transformation is grammar. Pedagogical grammar together with its forms, structures and stiff, prescriptive rules pervades even the most modern students' books and both the minds of teachers and students. No wonder that students do not feel at ease when a grammar oriented teacher tries to convince them to the ideas s/he is not totally convinced of. In the course book *Oxford Excellence for matura* the authors present to learners lists of extensive tense usages. The same applies to articles. In his book *English Grammar in Use* Murphy states that if 'the first word is usually the name of a person ('Kennedy') or a place ('Cambridge'), we do not usually use 'the' with names like these; but we say 'the White House', 'the Royal Palace', because 'white' and 'royal' are not names like 'Kennedy'[1]. Murphy also adds that 'this is only a general rule and there are exceptions'[2]. The main aim of the present article will be to show how teachers may use cognitive English grammar aspects in order to provide

[1] Murphy, Raymond: English Grammar in Use. CUP 2003. P. 154.
[2] Ibidem.

students with a deeper insight into the grammar of English, since revitalizing the traditional approach with the cognitive one allows a teacher to see the motivation behind grammatical rules and answer the questions that have been unanswerable so far.

In his book '*Metaphor. A Practical Introduction*' Kövecses writes as following:

> The issue of whether there are constraints on the production of metaphors is closely related to another one: the issue of the predictability of metaphors. Can we predict what the metaphors are in a particular language and across languages? The notion of 'predictability' characterizes formal theories of language (e.g., generative grammar) that (try to) model themselves on the 'exact' sciences such as physics. In this view, which metaphors we have should be predictable, and if our theory can't predict them, the theory can be claimed to be unscientific. Cognitive linguistics does not accept this view of what a theory should be capable of doing. In the description of metaphor in particular and of language in general, it breaks away from the notion of predictability and replaces this notion with *motivation*[3].

The motivation approach Kövecses writes about may also be equally applicable to great deal of grammatical notions both teachers and students tackle every day at schools. The motivation approach is the one that provides answers to the questions that have mostly been either left unanswered or left answered incorrectly. In this paper I will focus on five fairly standard grammatical problems which while approached in a non-standard way, with the aid of cognitive means, gain another dimension and become understood fully. The first one concerns linguistic categorization.

According to cognitive approach a category "is the conceptualization of a collection of similar experiences that are meaningful and relevant to us, i.e. categories are formed for things that *matter* in a community"[4]. What is more, categories, in opposition to Aristotle's approach, have fuzzy boundaries, their members do not have equal status, we do not have the situation of either-or not belonging to a category and we do not need to take into consideration the law of contradiction[5]. Instead we have two notions at disposal, namely PROTOTYPE and PERIPHERY. Owing to linguistic categorization we can explain, why despite of lack of some prototypical features e.g. PENGUIN or TURKEY still belong to the category of BIRD. As it can be observed on the table below both PENGUIN and TURKEY do not share all the features with the prototypical ROBIN. This fact, however, does not exclude them both from the category of BIRD. They will be placed within the same category but more within the peripheral area of it.

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3 Kövecses, Zoltán: Metaphor. Practical Introduction. New York: OUP 2002. P. 67.

4 Radden, Günter and Dirven, René: Cognitive English Grammar. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company 2007. P. 3.

5 Taylor, John: Linguistic Categorization. Oxford, New York: OUP 2005. Pp. 20–26.

Table 1. Goodness-of-example ratings for three members of the category BIRD

BIRD			
Features	***Robin***	***Penguin***	***Turkey***
feathers	+	+	+/–
beak	+	+	+
ability to fly	+	–	+/–
egg-laying	+	+	+
bipedal	+	+	+
endothermic	+	+	+

Analogically, we can explain to students why certain transitive verbs are easier to passivise than the other ones. Let us take a look at the following table on which the verbs *buy*, *like* and *have* are good candidates to be transitive verbs[6]. However, despite the fact that they take objects they do not passivise with equal easiness. To cap it all, the verb *have* does not passivise in the following example at all. This, however does not exclude the verb from the category of transitive verbs.

Table 2. Transitive verbs and their degree of passivisation

Active	***Passive***
1) Ann ***bought*** the cup.	The cup ***was bought*** by Ann.
2) Ann ***liked*** the cup.	? The cup ***was liked*** by Ann.
3) Ann ***had*** the cup.	!!! The cup ***was had*** by Ann.

Another example of aiding traditional grammar approach with the cognitive one is the case of teaching the notions of countability and uncountability. The notion of countability does not restrict itself to easily and often referred to distinctions between countable *coins* and *uncountable* money. At this point it is worth mentioning that the countable/uncountable distinction is not the matter of objective reality but purely subjective, depending on human perception. This subjectivity consists in making certain assessments concerning context in which nouns appear. For instance, if we find that counting a noun serves its purpose, is reasonable and is not beyond our capability of doing that, we may count it, if, however, counting a noun becomes nonsense we usually do not do that and this is the moment when a particular noun becomes uncountable. To give an example, consider the case of the noun HAIR. Mostly, students are taught to perceive the noun as uncountable since this particular context tells you that hair is the mass that grows on your head and there is no point in counting it. However, there are also situations in which A HAIR plays a vital role. These are white hairs left on the black sofa, a hair in your meal,

[6] Examples transformed; taken from Radden, Günter and Dirven, René: Cognitive English Grammar. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company 2007. P. 7.

two hairs at the scene or a hair under the microscope. In other words, these are e.g. investigators or doctors who, with their expertise and experience decide when to treat HAIR as not too meaningful mass and when to treat A HAIR as a vital investigation clue.

Another area of traditional approach to teaching grammar that could be supported or even replaced with the cognitive one is the area of teaching how article reference works. In their *Practical English Grammar* Thomson and Martinet on page 20 advise the following: "*the* is used before certain proper names of seas, rivers, groups of islands, chains of mountains, plural names of countries, deserts, regions"[7]. Such counting may be continued endlessly and the lists to remember differ in particular grammar books[8]. However, there are only a few who will learn all the rules. Unfortunately, even if they learn them by heart that will not give them a guarantee of using English articles correctly. To make things more complex one could always ask provocatively: How about a swamp? To use or not to use *the* article. In his book *Articles and Proper Names,* Berezowski[9] analyses cognitive motivation for proper names article patterns and provides the reader with answers you will never be found in traditional approaches to grammar. One of the most interesting cognitive motivations Berezowski falls back on is the Bounded vs. Unbounded Conceptualizations. Let us take a look at the examples[10] below:

Table 3. Cognitive motivation for proper names article patterns (Bounded vs. Unbounded Conceptualizations Case)

1.	*Everglades National Park*	*The Everglades*
2.	*Grand Canyon National Park*	*The Grand Canyon*
3.	*Utah*	*The Great Basin*
4.	*Western Australia*	*The Outback*
5.	*Lake Ontario*	*The Atlantic Ocean*
6.	*Jupiter*	*The Crab Nebula*
7.	*Israel*	*The Holy Land*

As can be inferred from the table it is enough to learn one motivation rule. Areas, territories, entities with clearly visible boundaries do not require *the* article. Those

7 Thomson, Jean and Martinet, Agnes: A Practical English Grammar. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 1996. P. 20.

8 Interesting observations concerning the use of articles were made by Król-Markefka in her article 'Pedagogical Rules For The Use Of English Articles: An Evaluation And Suggestions For Improvement'. Studia Linguistica Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis 129. For details see: 2.2. General observations.

9 Berezowski, Leszek: Articles and Proper Names. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego 2001. Pp. 152–155.

10 The examples presented in Table 3 come from Berezowski's book Articles and Proper Names. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego 2001.

areas or entities which do not have clear boundaries, or those with fuzzy boundaries e.g. *The Crab Nebula* or *The Okefenokee Swamp* are supplied with the article.

Another aspect that often escapes the traditional way of interpreting purely grammatical structures is the common belief that grammatical transformations do not influence meaning. Let us take a look at the following example:

Table 4. Prepositional dative vs. double object construction case

Prepositional dative construction	**Double object construction**
He sent flowers to Kate	*He sent Kate flowers*

For instance, the form of the prepositional dative construction (e.g., *He sent flowers to Kate*) is not arbitrary but puts emphasis on the path *traversed by flowers with Kate as a goal* as is signaled by the motion preposition *to*. Conversely, the double object construction (e.g., *He sent Kate flowers*) is said to emphasize the possessive relation between Kate and flowers by way of their "juxtaposition and linear order"[11]. Cognitive Grammar claims that the meaning of these two constructions is not necessarily identical because, among other things, they impose different construals on a common conceptual content. The prepositional dative construction construes transfer of possession in motion terms while the double object construction construes transfer of possession in terms of its outcome, i.e., the establishment of a relation of possession (or, more generally, control) between the indirect object and the direct object[12].

The point is that each of the sentence patterns is associated with an abstract meaning of its own. When we want to describe a certain event, we will use the pattern whose meaning most appropriately fits our idea of the event. For example, if we want to express the idea that we intend to go somewhere, we are most likely to select the complement pattern as in (a); if, however, we understand this to be a special mountaineering feat, the transitive pattern as in (b) is better suited: (a.) Tomorrow, I will be climbing on Mount Ben Nevis. (*complement pattern*) (b.) Tomorrow, I will be climbing Mount Ben Nevis[13]. (*transitive pattern*)

Another traditional grammar area that could be readily supported with the cognitive Viewing Frame idea is the one teaching the difference between the Present Simple and the Present Continuous Tense. In viewing a scene we may take a more distant or a closer position giving us a wider or more restricted viewing frame. To give an example from Radden and Dirven's book, imagine the scene of a train travelling from Norwich to Peterborough. An observer looking at the scene from an

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[11] Langacker, Ronald: Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Vol. 1: Theoretical Prerequisites. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 1987. P. 39.

[12] Broccias, Cristiano: The English Change Network: Forcing Changes into Schemas. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter 2003.

[13] Examples transformed and taken from Radden, Günter and Dirven, René: Cognitive English Grammar. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company 2007.

aeroplane has a *maximal viewing frame*: she has the whole train route in her view, including its termini in the two cities and the surroundings. We also have a maximal viewing frame of the train route when we study a map of the railway network and trace the connection between the two towns with our finger. When travelling on the train, however, the view from the window of our compartment only lets us see that part of the route which we are passing at any given moment. The endpoints of the section fall outside the viewing frame, even though of course we know that the train journey has a beginning and an end. We now have a *restricted viewing frame*. These two viewing situations are evoked by the grammatical structures used in sentences. It is also vital to add that the wider-restricted viewing frame dichotomy does not concern only the present simple vs. present continuous case. It may freely be used in explaining some other tense related problematic cases[14]. This for instance may be the distinction between the following sentences:

a) He stroke the dog.

b) He is stroking the dog.

In this case, by means of the frame tool, one may provide a solution to the complicated aspect related problems of the events that are bounded and finished at the same time in opposition to the ones whose borders both the sender and receiver cannot see.

One may of course have doubts concerning both students' age and the command of English they should have. On the one hand it goes without saying that a good command of English will generate more notable success in teaching. On the other, giving up complicated cognitive nomenclature in place of visualization may also result in considerable success at lower levels. This, however will definitely require more effort on the part of the teacher. Such visualization was suggested by Bielak and Pawlak in the below Present Simple/Present Continuous presentation and supported with various exercises. One of the exercises has been presented in the Appendix to the present article.

[14] Radden and Dirven, (2007). Cognitive English Grammar. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. P. 22.

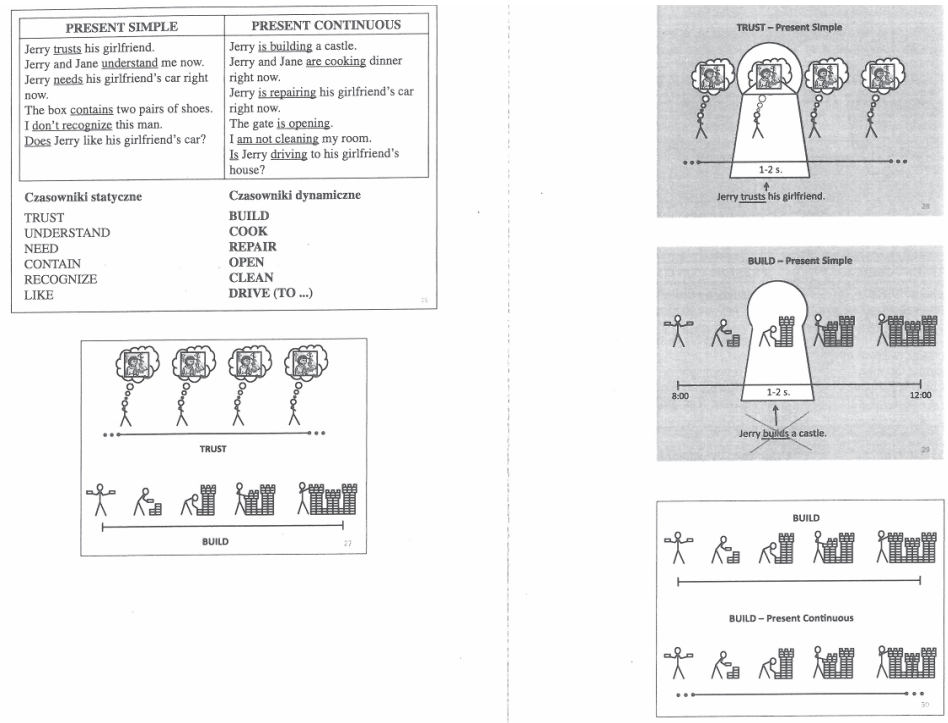

Fig. 1. Fragment of Cognitive Treatment Power Point Presentation. Present Simple/present Continuous. MÓWIENIE O TERAŹNIEJSZOŚCI[15].

To sum up, although English grammar books have recently changed much in terms of great variety of sentences that touch upon everyday communication situations, the teacher could also consider enriching their performance with cognitive motivation that in turn may shed some new light on standard grammar nuances.

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[15] Bielak and Pawlak, (2013). Applying Cognitive Grammar in the Foreign Language Classroom. Teaching English Tense and Aspect. Appendix C. Cognitive Power Point Presentation. Present Simple/Present Continuous MÓWIENIE O TERAŹNIEJSZOŚCI. Springer Heidelberg New York Dordrecht London. Pp. 240–241.

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APPENDIX:

Test B[16]

II. Uzupełnij zdania wstawiając podane w nawiasie słowa w odpowiednim czasie: Present Simple lub Present Continuous.

PRZYKŁAD:

Jerry (write)……writes……..**a letter every day**.

1. After his awful behavior, she (regard)…….Jerry as a coward.
2. Oh, it was a wonderful holiday. We (thank) ……you very much!
3. Captain, look! The enemy soldiers (surround) ……..the castle! Another ten minutes and we will not be able to escape!
4. I can't talk to you over the phone now, because I'm busy. … No, I (not, make) …….dinner now, I'm busy with something else. …..All right, I'll call you later.
5. You (deserve) …….. a dessert after all this hard work!
6. It was much better before, but now, after you added tomatoes, this soup (taste) ……. awful.
7. I want to give this present to Bill, who will be here in a minute. This is why I (wrap) …… the present in this paper.
8. (these students, respect) ……. Their teacher?
9. Can you see these two guys in dirty clothes? They (build) …… a doghouse for their dog; they would like to finish before evening.
10. At this moment Sally (iron) ……..her mother's blouse.
11. Susan can't answer the phone because she (comb)……..her hair.
12. I just (not, understand) ……..this man and his views.

[16] Bielak and Pawlak, (2013). Applying Cognitive Grammar in the Foreign Language Classroom. Teaching English Tense and Aspect. Appendix E: The Written Test. Projekt badawczy Jakuba Bielaka i Mirosława Pawlaka, Uniwersytet im. A. Mickiewicza, Kalisz. Springer Heidelberg New York Dordrecht London. Pp. 256–267.