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Teaching Grammar for Proficiency

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In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Humpty Dumpty tells Alice that, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." In foreign-language pedagogy, one term that everyone uses is "grammar." Yet, as one reads the professional literature and attends workshops and conferences, it becomes clear that although the term "grammar" is frequently discussed or written about, the meanings that are ascribed to it vary widely.

There is as much definitional diversity in the area of what a grammar is as there is in what a grammar does. Some define "grammar" as only morphology and syntax, to the exclusion of other elements in a linguistic system. Under this definition, the English form "table" presumably would not come out of the "grammar" of English, although the form "tables" would. Others understand "grammar" more broadly, i.e., as any constraint on the co-occurrence or distribution of any kinds of linguistic forms. For these, the fact that native English words may begin with the sequence /strV-/ but not with /*strV-/ is as much a grammatical observation as is the fact that definite articles and possessive adjectives are in complementary distribution (e.g., "the book" or "his book," but not "*the his book"). The "Standard Theory" tells us that a grammar characterizes

the intrinsic competence of an idealized speaker/hearer of a language, and accounts for conditions on wellformedness by providing an underlying structural description for the infinitely many sentences in that language. In such a system, morphology as such is not even one of the major components, being divided up between the lexicon and the syntax. On the other hand, semantics is one of the major components (Chomsky, 1). From a pedagogical point of view, Krashen sees "grammar" as synonymous with "conscious learning," which he has defined as "conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them" (6, p. 10). Higgs has defined grammar as "a system for converting meaning into language" (2).

The preceding paragraph perhaps accounts for both the longevity and acrimony of the profession's debate over the role of "grammar" in foreign-language teaching. One need not look far in the professional literature or in foreign-language textbooks to find mutually exclusive positions staked out over this very issue. The purpose of this paper is to reconcile the dichotomy that many find between "teaching for communication" and "teaching grammar." I argue that such a dichotomy is much more imagined than real and is caused in large measure by concerned professionals *using the same words* in discussing their views and perspectives while implicitly *assigning them distinct meanings*. If this is indeed the case, it is no wonder that misunderstandings have arisen and endured over time.

The basic assumption of this paper is that all foreign-language teachers share the goal of helping students to become successful communicators in their

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