

COGNITIVE APPROACHES TO GRAMMAR AND L2 GRAMMAR TEACHING

Introduction

Grammar teaching provides one of the most essential components of any course in a foreign language. However, it also tends to be considered by teachers and learners alike as one of the most difficult areas of a language to master. The process of grammar teaching/learning not infrequently ends in failure in spite of all the efforts, good will and hard work on both sides. There have been many different solutions to this problem thus far, most of them concerned with specific classroom techniques or procedures. However, the issue still remains largely unresolved. So, where are the roots of the difficulties experienced by all those who embark upon the study of L2 grammar? Our answer to this question is that the real roots of the problem reach much deeper than specific techniques or methods of classroom practice. It might be the case that what is at fault here is the largely invalid model of grammar on which most L2 grammar teaching is currently based and which derives from generative-transformational tradition. The present paper argues for an alternative model of grammar, the so called *usage-based* model as developed by the researchers associated with the framework of Cognitive Linguistics and Construction Grammar in particular (Goldberg 1995, 2005, 2006). The paper undertakes to shed some light on what provides the foundational assumptions of the cognitive approach to grammar and to indicate their relevance to the field of L2 grammar teaching. More specifically, it deals with two general questions – *what grammar is* and *how grammar is learned* – whose importance for language teaching profession cannot be overestimated. However, we refrain from specific pedagogical proposals or solutions at this stage, leaving them for further empirical work.

1. What is grammar?

What has come to be known as *a cognitive approach to grammar* is not a monolithic, uniform framework. On the contrary, the term functions as a generic

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label for a family of different theories and perspectives, among which we find Langacker's model of Cognitive Grammar, Construction Grammar associated mainly with the names of Fillmore, Kay, Goldberg, and Radical Construction Grammar as developed by Croft. Although diversified in terms of their specific research foci, all those theories are bound by strong ties of shared assumptions and underlying principles, the most important of which is the common conception of grammar as "a structured inventory of conventional linguistic units" (Langacker 1987: 489). On cognitive account the category of linguistic units is defined very broadly as any *form-meaning pairing* which has occurred with sufficient frequency to become conventionalized. The other common term used in the literature of the field as a substitute for 'linguistic unit' is that of 'a construction', which has been defined by Goldberg (1995: 4) as follows:

C is a CONSTRUCTION iff_{def} C is a form-meaning pair $\langle F_i, S_i \rangle$ such that some aspects of F_i or some aspects of S_i is not strictly predictable from C's component parts or from other previously established constructions.

Given the fact that both terms – 'linguistic unit' and 'construction' – are used to refer to roughly the same range of phenomena, they will be used interchangeably in this paper. So, what specifically are linguistic units/ constructions that make up the grammar of a language? As already noted, the category is very broad in scope and embraces *form-meaning pairings* of any kind and size including single bound morphemes, words, (more or less) fixed multi word expressions, and finally abstract syntactic templates. To illustrate this point, we provide some examples below:

bound morphemes	-dis , -able , -ing, -ed
single words (both simple and complex)	sofa, read, up, over, hold-up, stopwatch
multi word expressions	let alone, even if, all of a sudden, see you later
fixed idioms	it takes one to know one, what's done cannot be undone
semi-fixed idioms	pull <someone's> leg, jog < someone's> memory kick the bucket
partially filled (productive) constructions	have a ... (as in have a drink/ shower/ walk), what x doing y (e.g. what are you doing, lying on the floor), go and VP (e.g. go and prove me wrong), 'the time away' construction (e.g. to drink the night away, to dance the night away)
Covariational Conditional (The X-er, the Y-er)	the sooner, the better the more you learn, the more you know
Ditransitive	Subj VObj ₁ Obj ₂ (She gave him a book; He gave her a kiss)
Passive	Subj aux VPpp (PP by) (The project has been completed by Mary)

The reservation to be made here is that the above listing is only illustrative, which is to say that it is not meant as an exhaustive inventory of different types of constructions as identified and elaborated on by cognitively minded grammarians. What it is meant to show, however, is that grammar is conceived of as a continuum of linguistic items differing widely in size, complexity, and function. This, in turn, represents an essential departure from the traditional, that is Chomskyan approach, which views grammar as a set of abstract rules for combining words into phrases and sentences. On cognitive account grammar is non-compositional – it consists of a huge number (presumably hundreds of thousands) of linguistic units which are stored in the minds of language users as all sorts of chunks or schemas. The notion of schema plays an important role in the cognitive framework – it has been instrumental in showing that linguistic units or constructions are not random occurrences but that they form a coherent and structured networks. The relationship between a schema and its instantiation(s) is argued to be one of the most important structuring devices of natural languages, and has been characterized by Langacker (1987: 492) as follows:

Structure A is a schema with respect to structure B when A is compatible with specifications of B but characterizes corresponding entities with less precision and detail.

To take an example, a very simple and basic schema for plural nouns [N+S] might be instantiated by a large repertoire of specific items such as dogs, houses, ideas, etc. The only difference between the general schemas (roughly corresponding to traditional rules) and actual instances of language use is in the degree of their specificity. Importantly, schemas perform an essential function of sanctioning devices, that is they are used as a point of reference by language speakers in making grammaticality judgments – if a given item is consistent with the underlying schematic representation it is grammatical, if not, it is classified as ill-formed. However, regardless of the degree of their schematicity or specificity, all language units are argued to have the equal status of form-meaning pairing, which entails that all aspects of language are inherently meaningful. Hence, not only words convey meanings (as maintained by generative grammarians), but also much more schematic constructions. For instance the abstract ditransitive template (Subj VObj₁ Obj₂), or passives (Subj aux VPpp (PP_{by})) are described as having some semantic potential independently of the words that fill them. This is a point which has been very persuasively presented by Goldberg in her 1995 publication exploring a few different argument structure constructions. Let us illustrate Goldberg's line of reasoning with the example of the English ditransitive construction, which she discusses in some detail. Thus, as the author suggests the construction is inherently associated with the 'successful transfer' sense (mnemonically labeled as: Y CAUSES X to RECEIVE Z). It is important to reiterate that this meaning is associated with the construction as such and not the meanings of the verbs that happen to fill it. The significance of this observation might not

be quite clear if we limit our attention to the most prototypical instances such as ‘Mary gave John a book’, which might be argued to owe its ‘transfer’ meaning to the verb ‘give’. However, the point becomes much more lucid if we consider some less typical instances:

- (1) Chris baked Jane a cake.
- (2) Someone left you this note.
- (3) John allowed Billy a popsicle.

Goldberg’s argument is that all the above sentences imply some sort of ‘transfer’ between the agent and the receiver. However, this meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of the verbs, which are generally considered to be the main meaning determinants of a sentence. In other words, there is nothing inherent in the semantics of the verbs such as ‘bake’, ‘leave’, ‘allow’, which suggests that one person gives or intends to give something to another person. So, the only possible solution to this problem is that the ‘transfer’ meaning resides in the syntactic configuration associated with the ditransitive construction as such. Put it differently, without the (largely subconscious) awareness of the link holding between Subj V Obj₁ Obj₂ pattern and its schematic meaning Y CAUSES X to RECEIVE Z, we would be at a complete loss to understand sentences (1) – (3).

Furthermore, a single schematic construction might have more than one meaning, that is it might be polysemous, just like a large part of lexicon. This is a very important observation substantiating the cognitive claim that language is a motivated and highly structured system where “everything sort of hangs together” (Taylor 2007: 115). To illustrate this point let us return to Goldberg’s analysis of the English ditransitive construction, which has been summarized in the diagram on page 74.

As shown in Figure 1, the senses of the ditransitive construction form a radial network – each of the extensions (B) – (F) represents a distinct meaning, which is, however, related to the most prototypical sense of ‘successful transfer’ on the basis of the so called “family resemblance” principle (cf. Rosch 1975). For instance, the transfer might not be actual but intended as in (F) and (D), the latter additionally implying some action undertaken by the agent so that the transfer could be accomplished at some future point. Furthermore, the transfer might be implied by the “conditions of satisfaction” (cf. Searle 1983) associated with the actions denoted by verbs such as promise, guarantee, or owe, as in (B), or it might be merely “enabled” by the agent, as in (E). Finally, it might also be the case that the notion of transfer is evoked by negating it as in (C), which is probably the least prototypical of all the extension, as listed by Goldberg².

² Listing specific linguistic items typically or most strongly attracted by a particular construction is becoming an increasingly common research procedure within constructivist

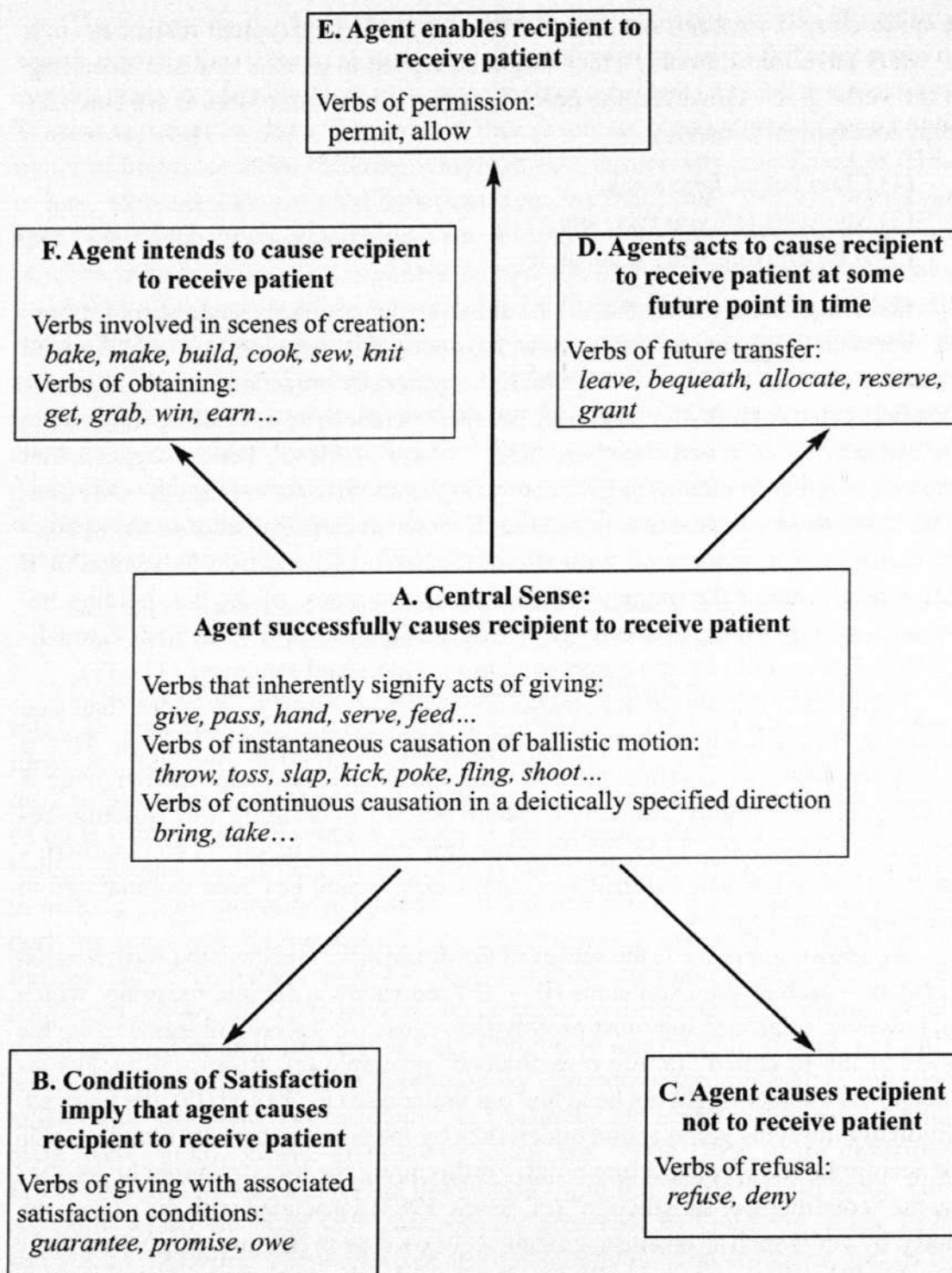


Figure 1 (after Goldberg, 1995: 38)

framework. This approach has recently gained some momentum due to the work by Stefanowitsch and Gries (2003, 2004, to appear) concerned with the statistical methods of assessing the degree of attraction between constructions and their lexical 'fillers'.

Thus, as the diagram makes clear, the different senses of the ditransitive construction are not random or arbitrary occurrences but are motivated by their “family resemblance” to the central meaning of ‘successful transfer’. Goldberg’s discussion is not, however, limited to the cases presented in the diagram. The second and equally important part of her analysis is devoted to demonstrating the role of metaphor in motivating the semantic extensions of the ditransitive construction. Here are some examples:

- (4) Mary gave Joe a kiss.
- (5) Mary’s behavior gave John an idea.
- (6) She gave me the flu.
- (7) The medicine brought him relief.
- (8) The rain bought us some time.

While on the traditional account the above sentences would be thought of as idiosyncratic uses of verbs ‘give’ and ‘bring’, in Goldberg’s analysis they are all instances of the underlying conceptual metaphor CAUSAL EVENTS ARE TRANSFERS, and thereby constitute a part “of a large and productive class of expressions that are based on systematic metaphors” (Goldberg 1995: 141). Yet another metaphor underlying the semantic extensions of the ditransitive construction as discussed by Goldberg is the Conduit Metaphor (cf. M. Reddy 1979) according to which IDEAS ARE OBJECTS and COMMUNICATION IS A TRANSFER OF THESE OBJECT FROM THE SPEAKER TO THE HEARER. Here are some examples:

- (9) She told Jo a fairy tale.
- (10) She quoted Jo a passage.
- (11) She gave Jo her thoughts on the subject.

Our discussion of the ditransitive construction, selective and incomplete as it might be, brings together the most important insights of the constructivist approach to grammar, which can be summarized as follows:

- grammar is not a set of abstract rules but a vast and diversified repository of constructions, that is *form-meaning pairings*,
- lexis-syntax dichotomy is invalid – they constitute two poles of the same language continuum,
- all aspects of grammar are meaningful,
- constructions are not random or arbitrary occurrences but form a coherent network of senses related to the prototype by “family resemblance”, or conceptual metaphors.

We shall conclude this section by emphasizing that the strength of the cognitive approach, as we conceive of it, manifest itself most clearly in its ability to accommodate the whole spectrum of language usage, that is both – fully schematic

and very productive patterns as well as much more idiosyncratic instances. This has been very pertinently expressed by Goldberg (1995: 6) in the following passage:

Theorists working within this theory share an interest in characterizing the *entire* class of structures that make up language, not only the structures that are defined to be part of “core grammar.” This interest stems from the belief that fundamental insights can be gained from considering such non-core cases, in that the theoretical machinery that accounts for non-core cases can be used to account for core cases. In addition, much of actual corpus data involves such non-core cases.

The view of language as presented in this section is commonly referred to as a *usage-based* model to emphasize the fact that grammar includes both item-specific knowledge and broad generalizations, which coexist side by side. In fact, these two types of knowledge mutually complete one another in that the more schematic units arise as generalizations from more specific instances of language use.

The *usage-based* model has been very influential not only in descriptive and explanatory work of theoretical linguists, but it has also been integrated into the theory of language acquisition, to which we turn in the following section.

2. How is grammar learnt?

The cognitive definition of grammar as an inventory of linguistic units inevitably raises the question of how such a huge and diversified collection of items can be learnt by a language learner given the limited amount of input she is exposed to. Even more importantly, there is the question of how it is possible for a language learner to produce sentences which have never occurred in the input. These are the kinds of questions that any sound theory of language must, sooner or later, come to terms with. There have been many answers to these questions so far, the most influential of which is undoubtedly the generative model of Universal Grammar postulating the existence of Language Acquisition Device – an innate predisposition of human mind to produce and comprehend language. Cognitive Grammar runs counter to this widely acknowledged conception and puts forth the thesis that language learning is item-based rather than rule-based. There is an extensive body of research which provides empirical support for this thesis (e.g. Ninio 1988; Peters 1983; Tomasello 2000, 2002, 2003). Tomasello, for instance, demonstrates in one of his longitudinal studies that item-based language learning proceeds in a strictly specified order – infants first acquire specific items, that is words, next more complex multi word chunks, before developing abstract schematic categories such as SubjVObj. What is remarkable about this study is that young learners move very smoothly to the stage of creative language use and begin to construct new utterances “out of variously already

mastered pieces of language of various shapes and sizes, and degrees of internal structure and abstraction” (Tomasello 2003: 307). On Tomasello’s account linguistic productivity is strongly associated with the so called *pattern-finding skills* which “comprise a necessary component in children’s acquisition of language – children could not learn the meaningful syntactic constructions of a natural language without them – so their existence in pre-linguistic children is among the most important discoveries in recent years in the study of child language acquisition” (Tomasello and Akhtar 2003: 317).

What is worth emphasizing here is that cognitively-oriented researchers exhibit a considerable amount of optimism with respect to the language learning process, arguing that “constructions can be learned, and learned quickly, on the basis of input” (Goldberg 2006: 227). The main point behind this simple but appealing formulation is that the general cognitive abilities a human being brings with her to the process of language learning provide a sound enough basis for actual learning to take place. It should be reiterated here that the cognitive skills employed for language learning are ‘general’ in the sense that they are not limited to linguistic behavior only but are used for other cognitive tasks as well.

In her recent publication *Constructions at work. The Nature of Generalization in language* Goldberg presents some experimental research in support of the ‘learning’ theory. The key observation that emerges from the authors’ psycholinguistic experimentation is that linguistic productivity is to large extent a result of the natural ability of the human mind to *generalize* over familiar instances. Goldberg derives this observation from the empirical study (Goldberg and Casenhiser 2005) aimed at testing “learners ability to learn to pair a novel construction meaning with a novel form: exactly the task that the child faces when naturalistically learning a language” (Goldberg 2006: 79). The authors invented novel, non-existent constructions with familiar nouns and non-existent verbs arranged in a nonsense way according to the following pattern: NOUN PHRASE₁ NOUN PHRASE₂ NONSENSE VERB. These constructions were subsequently assigned the meaning of ‘appearance’³. For instance, the sentence ‘The spot the king moopos’ was paired with visual stimuli (video clip) which showed a spot appearing on the king’s nose. In the initial stage of the experiment these stimuli were used to teach the learners to link the syntactic pattern in question with the ‘appearance’ meaning. All the learners were taught 5 new (non-existence) verbs altogether, which were presented in 16 sentences conforming with the nonsense syntactic pattern. The participants (children aged 5-7) watched the video clips accompanied by a voice describing particular scenes. Importantly, the children were

³ Inventing nonsense linguistic items is a common procedure in psycholinguistic experimentation to ensure that the forms have not been previously acquired by the learner.

divided into three groups – the control, balanced frequency, and skewed frequency condition group. All the children watched the same clips but the control group could not hear the sentences describing the scenes because the sound was turned off. The balanced frequency and the control frequency groups, on the other hand, differed in term of the frequency with which they heard particular verbs. In the balanced group the three novel verbs occurred four times and two novel verbs occurred twice (4-4-4-2-2). In the high frequency group one of the verbs appeared with much higher token frequency (eight times) than the other ones, which occurred only twice each (8-2-2-2-2). After the training, the children were tested on the same syntactic patterns, which were, however, filled with new verbs, not heard by the learners in the training session. The children's task was to choose the sentences which matched the new video clips, only half of which presented the 'appearance' meaning. The result of the test was as follows: the control group did very poorly at this task, the balanced frequency group showed a statistically significant improvement on the control group, while the skewed frequency group showed the highest percentage of corrects answers.

Casenhiser and Goldberg's experiment has been presented here in some detail as it seems to provide very convincing evidence for what constitutes the very basic assumption of the usage-based model, namely that people are capable of learning new form-meaning pairing on the basis of the input and that this process proceeds very quickly and efficiently (the training lasted only 3 minutes). The second important observation is that people do make generalizations on the basis of the previously learned instances, that is they extend the learned patterns to novel situations. Finally, the quality of the input has an important role to play, as the case of the skewed frequency group has shown. Specifically, the fact that in natural discourse particular constructions tend to be filled with one high frequency item significantly facilitates the acquisition of constructional meanings. In other words, most constructions appear to be focused around particular verbs which are much more frequent in this construction than any other lexical filler⁴. Hence, not only the human ability to generalize over what has already been learned but also the structure of the natural linguistic input works towards facilitating the process of language leaning.

In summary, let us recapitulate the main assumptions associated with the usage-based approach to language acquisition:

- language is learned item-by-item on the basis of input and general cognitive abilities,

⁴ As has been noted in the previous section, some empirical evidence for this observation can be found in the works of Stefanowitsch and Gries (2000, 2003).

- knowledge of language involves both knowledge of instances and knowledge of generalizations,
- skewed input facilitates the process of generalizing over familiar instances.

The above conclusions have been formulated on the basis of the empirical evidence from L1 learning. However, it is generally assumed that the mechanisms of L2 learning are not unlike those of L1 learning. Consequently, much of what has been said in this section can serve as a point of reference in designing research procedures aimed at investigating the patterns of L2 acquisition. In particular, it seems worthwhile to look at how the general cognitive abilities such as generalizing over familiar instances and pattern finding skills are exploited by the L2 learner. Furthermore, the role of skewed input in L2 teaching/learning process is an area that merits further examination.

3. Cognitive approach to grammar: implications for L2 grammar teaching

As has been shown in the two preceding sections Cognitive Linguistics offers new answers to the two fundamental questions of what grammar is and how it is acquired. It seems quite apparent that these insights cannot remain unnoticed or ignored by the specialists associated with the pedagogical field, and with the field of foreign language teaching in particular. By analogy to sections (2) and (3), our considerations in this section center around the two general areas, namely the 'what' and 'how' of language teaching. More specifically, we shall consider the potential implications of the usage based model for the contents ('what') and methods ('how') of L2 grammar teaching.

Starting with the contents, the usage-based model suggests a shift from general, all-encompassing rules (or schemas), to more specific instances and patterns of language use such as all sorts of language chunks, prefabricated expressions and partially filled patterns. As Langacker (2001: 4) has observed:

Since regular constructions of full generality constitute only a small proportion of conventional patterns, complete mastery of linguistic rules (as normally conceived) does not assure any degree of actual fluency in a language [...]. To achieve fluency, one has to learn in addition a vast store of fixed expressions and normal ways of phrasing things in particular circumstances, out of all the ways the "rules" in principle permit. Only by controlling this immense inventory of conventional expressions and conventional modes of expression is it possible for speakers to put together a continuous flow of complex expressions in real time.

The above view of course is not a completely new voice in the pedagogical field. We all remember the stormy debates provoked by the publication of Lewis's *The Lexical Approach*, in which the author makes a point strikingly similar to the one made by Langacker. However, the book incurred much criticism at the time of its publication. The main objection was based on methodological grounds and

concerned the feasibility of acquiring by a learner so large a number of conventionalized expressions. Specifically, the argument was that learning hundreds of thousands of expressions was too overwhelming a task for an average language learner. It is undoubtedly a point that cannot be easily dismissed. On the other hand, rejecting new ideas on the grounds that they seem more difficult to implement is not the right path to follow. Admittedly, the generative notion of a finite set of rules for generating an infinite number of sentences might seem very appealing from the point of view of the didactic procedures. However, linguistic fluency does not reside in general rules, as has been argued throughout this paper. The cognitively oriented psycholinguistic research shows that people do actually learn languages on item-by-item basis, and most importantly that they are highly efficient in doing so. As we believe, this observation provides strong basis for certain reassessments as regards the contents of language teaching. Hence, language teaching materials should take account of a much wider spectrum of constructions, restoring the balance between the schematic and the specific. The other thing is that the task of learning a large number of constructions is not necessarily so overwhelming as it may seem if one takes into account the central cognitive assumption that constructions are not random or arbitrary occurrences but form a coherent and highly structured system. This, in turn, suggests some methodological solutions. For instance, the motivating links holding between different constructions such as part-whole relationship, schematic-specific relationship, "family resemblance", conceptual metaphors might be turned into an additional channel of more efficient language learning. Seen from this perspective, Goldberg's diagram representing the ditransitive construction (cf. Figure 1) looks like an almost ready-made teaching resource and as such could find its place in pedagogical grammars. Of course, it requires some adjustments in terms of the language used or the granularity of the semantic representation e.g. some senses might be lumped together to increase the clarity of the presentation. The point is that presenting grammatical constructions as a radial network of senses allows to accommodate a number of seemingly very diverse and unrelated bits of language. (e.g. 'John gave Mary a book' and 'John gave Mary a kiss'). Hence, the motivated nature of linguistic categories might be turned into teaching procedures aimed at promoting meaningful interactions with the target language structures and thereby limiting the amount of rote learning in the foreign language classrooms. Given the fact that the process of learning new things is more effective if based on logical reasoning and networks of various associations, the *usage-based* model seems a good place to start. Since a further discussion of this point would inevitably lead us to more specific pedagogical problems, which, as has been noted earlier, are eschewed in this paper, we shall finish this section with a few broad statements summarizing what has been said above:

- the contents of grammar teaching should be modified in order to restore the balance between fully general patterns and more idiosyncratic instances of

- language use – the former should not be prioritized at the expense of the latter, as it is currently the case in most FLT classrooms,
- the methods of language teaching should take account of the motivated and structured nature of linguistic categories,
- language teaching procedures should be correlated with human natural cognitive abilities such as generalizing over familiar instances and pattern-finding skills (cf. section 3).

Concluding remarks

It goes without saying that language teaching enterprise needs solid foundations in the form of a valid model of language to serve as a point of reference for syllabus designers and materials writers. The generative model, which has continued to provide such a point of reference for many years, has proved either insufficient or outright wrong in many critical aspects. The optimistic point, however, is that the field of theoretical linguistics is in the state of constant development and does not cease to provide us with fresh ideas and, as we believe, increasingly more adequate answers to the fundamental questions of what language is and why it is the way it is. It is our firm belief that the cognitive approach to grammar (and language in general), as sketchily outlined in the present paper, constitutes a viable alternative for language teaching profession. Particularly appealing from the point of view of the didactic process is the special emphasis cognitively minded linguists place on meaning and uncovering the underlying conceptual phenomena governing the structure and use of linguistic forms. As convincingly argued by Goldberg and other researchers of the same persuasion, syntax has strong semantic foundations, which determine the distribution of particular syntactic categories. The cognitive approach thus effectively undermines the traditional notion of syntactic arbitrariness bringing to light the structured and motivated nature of grammar. The realization and appreciation of these facts by language teaching professionals could mark an important step towards more meaningful and effective L2 grammar teaching/learning.

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ABSTRACT

The present paper takes up the issue of the relationships holding between theoretical models of grammar and the theory and practice of L2 grammar teaching. It is argued that the generative model, which has continued to exert a strong influence on what happens in ELT classrooms, is largely invalid, and thus is the source of theoretical and methodological problems in L2 education. We consider the *usage-based* model, as developed by researchers working within the framework of Cognitive Linguistics, to be a much more reliable alternative both in terms of its descriptive and explanatory power. The paper is intended as a brief introduction to the *usage-based* model, addressing two general questions of *what grammar is* and *how grammar is learned* - whose importance for language teaching profession is beyond any dispute. More specifically, we focus on the misconceptions associated with the rule-based view of language and suggest that the construction-based model represents a much more adequate reflection of the true nature of language, and thus has all the potential of making a positive contribution to language teaching profession. The paper is concluded with some considerations on the pedagogical implications of the cognitive approach to grammar. However, the discussion in this last section is very general in nature, avoiding any specific methodological questions and solutions.