Reference Grammars and Language Teaching: Fogarasi's *Grammatica italiana del Novecento*

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In an era when classroom methodology is becoming more and more oriented toward the development of functional, or communicative, proficiency, the role and nature of formal grammatical training are being continually scrutinized and debated. This new stress on communication is partially a consequence of the shift in theoretical linguistics away from what was previously an almost exclusively structural, or microlinguistic, approach to one that is increasingly sociological. The assumption in grammar-based approaches was that once the grammatical system was mastered, learners would instinctively know how to apply the system to produce their own utterances to fit given interactional situations. The lack of success in this area has been used by communication theorists to argue against formal grammatical training. However, on the other side of the debate, it is pointed out by formal theorists that the lack of success in communicative fluency was not caused by grammatical training in itself, but by the lack of opportunities to use the acquired grammatical knowledge in interactional settings.

The debate between communication and formal theorists has been an instructive one. It has drawn attention to the fact that language learning is not a monolithic process, but a multifaceted one. In fact, it can be said that both sides are right, since language is both form and communication. One implies the other. The source of the misunderstanding between the two sides is methodological because, as Stern aptly points out, all "language teaching theories are artefacts which highlight some aspects of language at the expense of others."¹ As a result of this fruitful debate, methodological research has now begun to look at ways in which to in-

tegrate both grammatical and communicative objectives in a meaningful and interrelated fashion.

The publication of the second edition of Fogarasi's monumental reference grammar, *Grammatica italiana del Novecento*, draws attention once again to this ongoing debate.² In addition, it also raises the question of the function of reference grammars in a pedagogical context. It is these questions that will be addressed in this paper with reference to the contents of Fogarasi's grammar, even though it was not written with the teacher of Italian as a second language in mind.³

The term *grammar* is subject to a series of interpretations, but in a pedagogical situation it implies a core of meaning understood by all. Etymologically, it can be traced to the Ancient Greeks who closely linked the concept to both the craft of writing and to the study of logic. It derives from their word *grámma*, a letter of the alphabet. Without going into the various types of grammars here, suffice it to say that in its essence a grammar is an attempt to account for pattern in language structure. It is concerned, as Allen accurately observes, with *code* rather than with *uses of code*, since it "aims to give a systematic account of the idealized linguistic knowledge, or competence, which underlies the actual use of language."⁴ In the area of second language teaching, the issue that is of paramount importance is to decide what role a grammatical description of the target language should play in classroom methodology. To phrase the question more concretely: Does the study and practice of structure produce a learning behaviour? And, if so, does grammatical knowledge lead to communicative fluency?

Before discussing these questions, it is perhaps useful to review briefly what is meant by a *pedagogical grammar*. Essentially, this is an analysis of the language to be taught in line with the learning characteristics presumed to be present in a specific group of learners. A pedagogical grammar normally takes on the form of a language manual or textbook. As Allen puts it, pedagogical grammars "provide a comparatively informal framework of definitions, diagrams, exercises and verbalized rules which may help a learner acquire knowledge of a language and fluency in its use."⁵ Such grammars are constructed on the basis of four general principles: sequencing, intelligibility, practice, and levelling. The treatment of the forms and structures of a target language is carried out in a sequential, cumulative way. This is based on the premise that certain complex structures require the knowledge of more elementary ones. Thus, for instance, in Italian elementary pedagogical

grammars, it is common to find that the subjunctive mood is treated near the end for the reason that sentence embedding and indicative tense structure need to be understood beforehand. Intelligibility refers to the kinds of explanations given. In many cases, the explanations take on the form of comparative statements to the language already known by the learners. Often, the grammatical structure to be taught is exemplified in simple ways such as by dialogues, stories, etc. The idea is always to make the structure in question easily accessible to the learners.⁶ All pedagogical grammars offer the opportunity to practice the items presented by means of exercises, drills, and various activities. The nature and scope of these are keyed to the stage of learning. Levelling refers to the construction of grammars according to the stage of learning. Elementary grammars are written for those studying the language for the first time; intermediate and advanced grammars are designed to review and expand upon the initial learning phase. It is in the construction of pedagogical grammars that a reference work such as the one by Fogarasi can play a crucial role. Reference grammars provide the textbook writer and the classroom teacher with the relevant structural and lexical information.

For many decades, it has been assumed that the study of form and structure is a crucial point of departure for learning how to speak a foreign language. Recently, as discussed above, this assumption has been called into question by the so-called communication theorists who point out that formal grammatical training does not produce effective "users" of the language.⁷ While this critique is certainly valid, the use of approaches based solely on communication has raised questions about the general nature of classroom learning. Some of these have been eloquently articulated by Prokop in a recent study:⁸

1. Is mere exposure to natural language without explicit and conscious attention to form at one time or another, a sufficient condition for acquisition?
2. Why must it be that the acquisition of structure is incidental to the transaction of content?
3. Why must it be that the mechanisms involved in subconscious learning be significantly different from those involved in conscious learning?

The solution to the structure vs. communication controversy is, in my view, simply that both sides are only partially right. In fact,

it is now emerging as clear from various empirical studies that *practice* in speaking does not always lead to *fluency* in speaking. Classroom methodology is, in fact, beginning to respond to this situation by becoming more "eclectic" or "integrated."⁹ Structure and communication are only two modalities of the language phenomenon. Language can also be used for non-communicative purposes such as thinking and playing. The pleasure of using language, as Atkinson, Kilby and Roca point out, "appears to be connected to language itself, quite independently of whether it is communicated to someone else or not."¹⁰

Thus, in answer to the main question posed in this paper, namely the place of formal grammatical training in second language teaching, the evidence now seems to support its integration into a broader methodological framework which will include training in communication and in other language modalities. Furthermore, it now seems clear that the study of grammatical form in itself is meaningless unless it is related to the ways in which it is used in communication. A reference grammar, such as the one by Fogarasi, can play a vital role in preparing the teacher, since it provides valuable microlinguistic and macrolinguistic information that can be embodied into the methodological *modus operandi*. Indeed, the most attractive aspect of Fogarasi's treatment is the reference to registers and contexts of use (e.g., *italiano letterario* vs. *italiano popolare*). In a similar fashion to Lepschy and Lepschy's excellent grammar,¹¹ Fogarasi thus focuses on form *qua* function, rather than on form in a narrow microlinguistic sense.

Fogarasi starts off the grammar with a list of technical works consulted (pp. 14-29); this in itself constitutes a valuable bibliography on various aspects of the Italian language (both synchronic and diachronic). In a brief introductory chapter (pp. 33-36), Fogarasi defines certain key concepts: the origins of Italian, the distinction between the standard language and its dialects, general structural features of Italian, etc.

The first chapter ("Fonetica," pp. 37-102) deals with the phonological system of Italian. Using the main concepts of structural linguistics (e.g., articulatory classification, phonemic analysis, etc.), Fogarasi gives us an in-depth description of the segmental and prosodic features of current Italian. The only exception one can take with Fogarasi is in the treatment of the open and close distinction in the vowel system (/e vs. ɛ/ and /o vs. ɔ/). Outside of a brief mention that "c'è la tendenza al livellamento delle due coppie di fonemi" (p. 56), one gets the impression that this oppo-

sition is still valid in all parts of Italy. It is not possible to go into the details of this controversial question here.¹² Suffice it to say that the macrolinguistic parameters involved are far more complex than Fogarasi's analysis would lead one to believe. Fogarasi's treatment of prosodic structure (accent, intonation, etc.) is remarkably detailed. Needless to say, the prosodic dimension is the most neglected one in the teaching of pronunciation.

In the second chapter ("Lessicologia," pp. 103-49), Fogarasi gives us an interesting treatment of some basic lexico-semantic features of Italian. After describing basic concepts like polysemy, homonymy, synonymy, and antonymy, Fogarasi documents learned words (from Latin and Greek), neologisms and loanwords. Then he looks at word-formation processes (derivation, compounding, substantivization, etc.). Such lexical topics are obviously useful for advanced courses. In the third ("Morfosintassi," pp. 152-332) and fourth ("Sintassi," pp. 333-419) chapters, Fogarasi describes the morphological and syntactic characteristics of Italian. As already mentioned, the most valuable aspect of Fogarasi's method is the constant reference to current usage. Thus, for example, in discussing the object pronouns, he correctly points out that the use of *loro* "oggi appare piuttosto letterario, nell'uso quotidiano e familiare si diffonde al suo posto *gli*" (p. 239). Useful charts and graphic devices enrich Fogarasi's method of presentation.

To conclude, a reference grammar has an important role to play in second language pedagogy in that it provides the teacher with the details of what is to be taught. How the teacher utilizes this information will depend on the specific learning situation. If nothing else, an up-to-date grammar such as Fogarasi's will keep the teacher abreast of developments in the language. To put it another way, a reference grammar is a tool that a teacher can use to make sure that the content of a grammatical syllabus is accurate and complete.

One final comment on the place of grammatical training in second language methodology is in order. Even in the current *Zeitgeist* of communicative language teaching, the danger still facing most language teachers is to equate language learning with the acquisition of grammatical knowledge. The teacher must always keep in mind that the structures of a language are the tools of human interaction. It is always wise to remember, as Brown aptly puts it, that the idea in second language pedagogy is to "get away

from 'data generated in the rocking chair' and attend more faithfully to the real world."¹³

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NOTES

- 1 H.H. Stern, *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 185.
- 2 Miklós Fogarasi, *Grammatica italiana del Novecento* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1984). The first edition appeared in 1969. Fogarasi gives a schematic summary of the criteria used to revise the grammar in an article he published several years ago: "Sulla propria 'Grammatica italiana del Novecento. Sistemazione descrittiva.' Criteri informativi dell'opera," in *Grammatica: aspetti teorici e didattici*, ed. F.A. Leoni and M.R. Pigliascio (Roma: Bulzoni, 1979), pp. 5-10.
- 3 To the best of my knowledge, the only reference grammar written specifically for teachers and English-speaking students of Italian is the one by Sergio Adorni and Karen Primorac, *English Grammar for Students of Italian* (Ann Arbor: Olivia and Hill Press, 1982).
- 4 J.P.B. Allen, "Pedagogic Grammar," in *Techniques in Applied Linguistics*, ed. J.P.B. Allen and S. Pit Corder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 59-60.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 6 Accounts of the nature of intelligibility and appropriateness in pedagogical grammars can be found in R.A. Fisher, "The Inductive-Deductive Controversy Revisited," *Modern Language Journal*, 63 (1979), 98-105; D.E. Peacock, "Towards Rules for Rules in Foreign Language Textbooks," *Foreign Language Annals*, 12 (1979), 364-67; Marcel Danesi, "On the Characteristics of Pedagogical Rules Illustrated by the Temporal Uses of Italian *da/per*," *Association of Teachers of Italian Journal*, 37 (1982), 2-10; and Marcel Danesi, "Pedagogical Graphics in Second-Language Teaching," *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 40 (1983), 73-81.
- 7 Two excellent accounts of the relationship between grammars and methodology can be found in Renzo Titone, "Dalle grammatiche funzionali alla 'Performance Grammar'," in *Grammatica: aspetti teorici e didattici*, ed. F.A. Leoni and M.R. Pigliascio (Roma: Bulzoni, 1979), pp. 101-16; and Gaetano Berruto, "Sociolinguistica e grammatiche scolastiche," in *Grammatica: aspetti teorici e didattici*, ed. F.A. Leoni and M.R. Pigliascio pp. 119-36.
- 8 Manfred Prokop, "The Language Laboratory and the Natural Approach," *Alberta Modern Language Journal*, 23 (1984), 3-21.
- 9 For a coherent account of the reasons in favour of integrated teaching approaches see Stern, *Fundamental Concepts*, op. cit.; and Renzo Titone, "Dove va la glottodidattica?" in *Studies in Italian Applied Linguistics*, ed. N. Villa and M. Danesi (Ottawa: Canadian Society for Italian Studies, 1984).
- 10 Martin Atkinson, David Kilby and Iggy Roca, *Foundations of General Linguistics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982), pp. 22-23.
- 11 Laura Lepschy and Giulio Lepschy, *The Italian Language Today* (London: Hutchinson, 1977).
- 12 For a summary of the main aspects of this question, see Marcel Danesi, "The Italian Mid Vowels: A Case for Geophonemes and Geophones," *Geolinguistics*, 7 (1981), 59-69.
- 13 H. Douglas Brown, *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), p. 239.