

1 Introduction

This book is a renewed version of the classic pedagogic interactional grammar of English, originally written by Willis Edmondson and Juliane House in 1981. This grammar was the first interactional grammar of English ever published, and it had a lasting impact on applied linguistics, language learning and teaching, and pragmatics. The framework of the grammar pioneered various ideas that became popular in interaction studies, particularly pragmatics, only much later. For example, the book argued that phenomena such as speech acts can only be systematically studied if one approaches them as part of situated interaction – a point which was largely ignored at the time. Unfortunately, the book went out of print and the original publisher ceased to exist. This is why we decided to make the book available again in a renewed, updated and extended form.

By the time of writing the present manuscript, both pragmatics and applied linguistics have witnessed major developments,¹ including the publication of the well-known communicative grammar of Leech and Svartvik (2003). Yet, we believe that there is a definite need for this book to come to life again in a revised and extended form, considering that its framework tackles many issues that continue to be in the focus of present-day research on language use in interaction. In particular, the book provides a rigorously systematic view of interactional phenomena, such as Gambits (or discourse markers), speech acts, interactional moves and so on. This sense of systematicity – which is the core of any grammar and the antithesis of idiosyncrasy – has been criticised by some in discursive research in pragmatics in the early 2000s.² However, ignoring the systematic and conventionalised features of language use would result in throwing out the baby with the bathwater.³ This is why we believe a grammar of interaction is very much needed today.

Thus, we have decided to make a bold move and reanimate a classic. We term this move a ‘bold’ one because in academic research one can often witness an assumption that new is unavoidably better than old, and classics of research are usually meant to be available as pure reprints – as mementos of past research. However, we believe that various ideas of the old 1981 version of this book are still innovative and fresh enough today, especially if we not

only directly reprint but also update and extend them. Accordingly, in this book we try to achieve a healthy balance between preserving the original text and updating it whenever needed. To this end, we kept many features of the original manuscript intact. For instance, back in time, this book was designed to serve as a grammar, and as such the authors were reticent about citations. We followed this convention in the new version, even at the risk of being at odds with the ‘ritual’ of citing a high number of studies to showcase our familiarity with academic research. However, considering the large amount of studies dedicated to interaction following the publication of the original grammar, we added endnotes to the manuscript, in order to more closely interconnect the grammar with the fields of pragmatics and applied linguistics.

1.1. The Present Grammar

A ‘grammar’ is commonly understood as a body of rules concerning the relations between different parts of sentences of a language. In a grammar, we expect to find references to transitive verbs, different classes of nouns, sentence structures featuring categories such as subject, object and so on. In other words, ‘grammar’ often means *syntax*. By an ‘interactional grammar’, we mean something rather different.

Firstly, we are attempting to describe language *in use*, such that we are less interested in sentences than in what speakers *do* with them when they talk to each other: they make requests, voice opinions, issue complaints, pay compliments and so on. We may say here that we seek to describe what speakers say as forms of *action*. In other words, we are pursuing an essentially pragmatic approach to language.⁴

Secondly, we are interested in describing what speakers *together* achieve through the use of language – we are interested in the *to* and *fro* of interaction, and not simply in isolated sentences or utterances. Together, speakers reach agreements, exchange opinions, make collective decisions, negotiate business deals, or simply satisfy very general social needs. Here, language is seen as not only a mode of action, but a means of *interaction*. When we refer to this grammar as ‘interactional’, we are referring to the ‘level’ of description – the perspective taken on language and its use.

Thirdly, we are interested in providing a *systematic* and *replicable* account of interaction, hence our choice of the expression ‘grammar’ in the title of this book.

We term this grammar, then, an *interactional grammar*. This grammar may be useful for teachers of foreign languages – in particular, English – and it may also be useful in the training of such teachers. It may also be used as a resource-book for textbook writers. It is a *pedagogic grammar*, and it seeks to make a contribution to applied linguistics, in making suggestions for

improving the teaching of English, on the basis of a body of *argued theory* and *empirical research*. Along with teachers and textbook writers, the grammar may also be relevant to academics working in the fields of applied linguistics, pragmatics and interaction studies, considering the pragmatic anchor of the framework proposed. Last, but not least, we sincerely hope that learners will find this grammar useful.

Our interactional grammar approaches English language use both inside and, mainly, outside of the classroom as an interactional engagement which follows conventional – and often ritual – practices.

What may this be taken to mean in practice? Firstly, this grammar is based on various extensive and systematically gathered corpora of spoken interactional data, including dialogues between pairs of English native speakers (speaking English, of course), between pairs of German native speakers speaking German, and between German learners of English, speaking English with native speakers. In two chapters, we also make use of large corpora, in particular the British National Corpus,⁵ as well as data elicited from Chinese learners of English. All these corpora helped us to systematise interaction and arrive at empirically derived categories to describe interaction in a bottom-up manner. Notwithstanding that we are working here with corpora, in order to exemplify elements of this grammar we often make use of relatively abstract examples, for example by referring to the interactants as ‘A’ and ‘B’, instead of providing details about their backgrounds or identities. We believe that the abstract form of the way in which data is presented in our book accords with the generic requirements of a grammar.

On the basis of the data studied in this book, we are in a position to take into consideration non-native English interactional behaviour, and various types of ‘errors’ commonly found in the conversational English of advanced learners.

We consider how classroom talk differs from the talk we find among expert speakers of English, or ‘native speakers’.⁶ Furthermore, we suggest ways in which interactional English may be incorporated into teaching programmes and into pedagogic settings, providing both empirical applied linguistic results and illustrative materials as practical examples. Such examples may be even more important now, in the globalised world, than back in time when the original version of this grammar was published. This is because by now English has become even more dominant as a global lingua franca.⁷

To sum up the goals of this pedagogic interactional grammar, we attempt to facilitate the teacher’s – and the learner’s – task by addressing the following issues:

1. What do English native speakers commonly say and do in their everyday talk? Here we address the basic issue of data.
2. When and why do speakers say and do different things in everyday talk? Why are there recurrences and related conventions and rituals in language

4 1 Introduction

use, and how can one capture them? Here we address the problem of adequate description.

3. What can go wrong from the learner's perspective, and why? Here we address the problem of evaluation.
4. How can learners be helped to acquire conversational skills? Here we address the central pedagogic issue.

In organising the content of this grammar, we have sought to take into account a variety of differing teaching approaches and materials. We do this as the present grammar is not a coursebook, and is not intended to be used as a substitute for coursebooks that may currently be in use. Rather, it may be used to supplement and hopefully enrich existing course materials of English. We have therefore tried to organise the book such that it may be potentially useful whether a coursebook that is being followed has a 'functional' approach, a 'situational' approach or a 'grammatical' approach. Crudely, these three approaches to syllabus-design and course-book planning are reflected in various chapters of this book.

1.2. Contents

The present grammar is organised as follows: in Chapter 2, we discuss the dilemma presented by the wish or requirement that 'communicative' English be taught in a foreign language classroom – which is naturally different from real life – and suggest different ways out of this dilemma, as general possibilities. The chapter therefore provides a practical applied linguistic background for the more theoretically motivated chapters to follow. In this chapter, we argue that many of the teaching dilemmas triggered by the setting of the foreign language classroom relate to the fact that that classroom provides its own ritual space, in which the conventions and practices and related rights and obligations holding for daily life are turned upside down.⁸ Thus, a key dilemma invariably facing the foreign language teacher is how to teach *real-life* language use in a *non-real-life* setting. The same dilemma, of course, faces the foreign language learner as well.

Chapter 3 presents a comprehensive way of analysing and describing interaction, serving as a model for the descriptions offered in the rest of the book. In the descriptive system explicated in this chapter, we approach interaction through units of various size, including expressions, illocutionary acts and Types of Talk representing discourse. The system presented in this chapter was not derived in a top-down manner, but rather emerged as an outcome of extensive empirical research.

In Chapters 4 and 5, we focus on the smallest component of the interactional grammar: expressions. Chapter 4 presents a way of analysing and describing expressions that are meant to lubricate the flow of interaction. The acquisition

of such expressions is not without problems, but it is very important for learners to be made aware of their use. We define this category of expressions as ‘Gambits’. While it is a popular assumption that Gambits – often called ‘discourse markers’ in the literature – are void of meaning, we will show that this is far from being the case.⁹

In Chapter 5, we examine those expressions through which language users conventionally indicate illocutionary acts such as requesting. We define these expressions as ‘Ritual Frame Indicating Expressions’ (RFIEs), arguing that they are recurrently used to indicate illocutionary acts in specific standard situations with preset rights and obligations for participants. Learning and teaching the use of such expressions can be particularly difficult due to their interactional load and linguacultural specificity.

Chapter 6 brings us to another component of this interactional grammar: illocutionary acts. In this grammar, we use the expressions ‘illocutionary act’ and ‘speech act’ interchangeably. The chapter provides a systematic and replicable interactional typology of such acts. This typology is particularly suitable for analysing discourse and understanding the role of illocutionary acts in discourse.

In Chapter 7, we provide an introduction into the highest unit in this grammar, discourse, through the analytic unit of Types of Talk. Types of Talk consist of interactional structures, into which speech acts can be slotted. We propose an inventory of speech acts by means of which one can systematise Types of Talk.

Chapter 8 presents an application of Chapter 7: here we present a case study of an important Type of Talk, namely Opening Talk. The chapter illustrates why the acquisition of both speech acts and Type of Talk is important and often challenging for learners of English, by reporting on experiments we conducted with Chinese learners of English.

Chapter 9 illustrates how conventional grammatic categories such as a specific tense or auxiliary verb may be linked with interactional behaviour as it is described in the current grammar. The aim of this chapter is to suggest to the reader how formal grammatical items may be practised in interactional sequences in the classroom.

Chapter 10 summarises the contents of the present grammar.

1.3. Conventions

Finally in this Introduction, we need to give some indication of the graphic conventions used in this book, and of the system we have adopted for displaying intonation.

Technical terms will generally be given in capitals. Expressions of actual language use quoted in the running text will be indicated with single quotation

6 1 Introduction

marks. In presenting ‘rules’ and structures, round brackets are used to present optional items, while curly brackets are used to present alternative items. Thus




– $\left(\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Hello} \\ \text{Good morning} \end{array} \right\} \right)$ I want to speak to Dr Smith (please)

indicates that either of the two greetings may, but need not necessarily, precede the request, and that this may, but need not, be followed by the expression “please”.

When an *inappropriate* utterance is cited, an uppercase Z will precede it:

- ZOh I’m very fine how are you

In displaying intonation patterns on utterances, we have adopted a system which is largely self-explanatory: the conventions followed are:

-  indicates a falling intonation
-  indicates a rising intonation
-  indicates combinations of the above

We seek to display the location and steepness of such intonational shifts directly. In addition

- " indicates a main stress
- ' indicates a secondary stress
- inserted between utterance elements indicates a brief pause

The issue of intonation in interaction is both complex and important: to deal with it adequately would require, however, a book in itself.¹⁰ When an utterance is cited to establish a point unrelated to its actual performance, intonation will not be marked. Further, our intonational markings do not suggest that our way is the *only* way an utterance may be spoken – stress, for example, is sometimes a moveable feast, cf.

$\overset{''}{\curvearrowright}$ I would say you're wrong $\overset{''}{\curvearrowright}$
 I would $\overset{\sim}{\curvearrowright}$ say you're wrong $\overset{''}{\curvearrowright}$
 I would say - you're wrong $\overset{''}{\curvearrowright}$ $\overset{''}{\curvearrowright}$ $\overset{''}{\curvearrowright}$

Regarding the use of pronouns, we preferred to avoid using the inclusive ‘he/she’, etc., so have opted to switch freely between pronouns ‘he’, ‘she’, etc.

Our conventions are generally much simpler than that of conversation analysis. This accords with the goal of this book to serve as an interactional pedagogic grammar of English, and not a reference material with relevance to academics only.

2 Communicative Interaction in the Foreign Language Classroom

2.1 Introduction

Language use in the foreign language classroom is ritually constrained: students are expected to mimic what the teacher says, roles are ratified,¹ and violations of the expected order of the interaction is usually sanctioned in one way or another.² A central issue we discuss is the following: how can we expect the learner to strive for an ‘authentic’ and everyday life-like use of the English language in a space in which language use is everything but everyday life-like?

It must be made clear from the start that, given the large number of variables at work in different classrooms – some of which we shall point out – there is no one ‘method’ which leads to learning ‘success’, and possible procedures for using the materials we wish to detail will be necessarily conditioned by the nature of the class the teacher is working with, the syllabus he is following, the textbook he is obliged to use, and so on. We give no recipes for success for the simple reason that such recipes do not exist. This said, it will be clear that the authors have opinions as to the relative value of different teaching procedures. These opinions will be argued, however, and presented without dogmatism. While the notion of infallible teaching recipes is illusionary, the concept of scientific neutrality is probably equally so. Ultimately, the present grammar aims to provide an essentially pragmatics- and interaction ritual-based view of the foreign language classroom, and so our objective is to raise awareness of the pragmatic complexity of the unachievable and unrealistic goal of learning how to sound life-like in a non-life-like setting.

2.2 Target versus Pedagogic Discourse

The type of English spoken in the classroom is clearly a major factor determining the type of English that is learnt there. The general thesis we want to propose here is that there is a tension in the foreign language classroom between using English which is appropriate to the *classroom*, and using English which is appropriate to the teaching *goals* – i.e. in the process of teaching English, we teach English of a particular kind, which we may call *pedagogic discourse*. This has

8 2 Communicative Interaction in the Foreign Language Classroom

perhaps led in the past to the complaint that, while our learners are ‘successful’ in the classroom, and can do all that we as teachers demand of them there, when they try to use the skills we have taught them *outside* the classroom, they are less ‘successful’.³ No ‘transfer’ of learning has taken place. We are suggesting here that no ‘transfer’ of learning is actually possible, as often what is *learnt* and what is *needed* for non-classroom talk are two different things. In fact, if ‘transfer’ is effected, it often leads to ‘error’ – such errors we may term ‘teaching-induced’.⁴ The paradox here is that the learner makes a mistake in talking English precisely because he has successfully learnt how to speak English in the ritual space of the classroom. In a nutshell, there is a difference here between *pedagogic* and *target* discourse. While a grammar of the present scope cannot resolve this paradox, it can help at least to systematically reflect on it.

One obvious reflection of this difference is the common observation that question–answer sequences between teacher and learner often have some unusual features, one being that more often than not the teacher ‘knows’ the answer before he asks the question, and in fact the learner often ‘answers’ the question *with* a question:⁵

(1)

Teacher: What is the capital of England?
 Learner: Is it London?
 Teacher: Yes, that’s right.

This is a typically routinised ritual interaction, lacking the free flow of interaction outside of the space of the classroom. More specifically, the learner is obliged to answer, and so is the teacher to confirm that the learner is right, which is a typical conventionalised classroom ritual. Even if such learner ‘answers’ are not given in the form of a ‘question’ (i.e. no interrogative sentence is used), a question intonation is often present, meaning something like “I’m not so sure if what I’m saying (or the way I’m saying it) is what you want, so please tell me if I’m right or not.”⁶ An instance of teacher-induced ‘error’ would then be the case in which this intonation pattern is ‘transferred’ to non-pedagogic settings and used in everyday talk in English. It seems in fact clear that this happens even with advanced learners.

The peculiar nature of ‘teacher-questions’ is well known and will be considered again below. For another simplistic illustration of possible differences between pedagogic and target discourse, consider now the following short interactional sequence:

(2)

Teacher: Can you swim well?
 Learner: Yes, I can.
 Teacher: Do you like potatoes?
 Learner: Yes, I do.

2.2 Target versus Pedagogic Discourse

9

Here we have a sequence of two ‘question–answer’ sequences. Even if we disregard a possible purpose the teacher might have had in initiating these two sequences (practising short-form answers, use of periphrastic “Do”, or whatever), it is in fact not easy to contextualise sequences like this in a non-pedagogic setting. In other words, they typically represent ritual interaction in a classroom, with specific rights and obligations, the related expectation for a preset interactional dynamic, and so on. This issue becomes visible as soon as one adds a minimal sense of context to this interaction, by providing various responses to the above questions. As an example, consider the first ‘question’, and the following possible ‘answers’:

(3)

A: Can you swim well?

B:

- (a) Oh I'll be allright - don't worry
 (b) Of course what do you mean can I swim well
 (c) Yes
 (d) Okay - I'll do it
 (e) Hmm quite well - I did a lot of swimming at school actually

If A is heard as expressing anxiety, B might seek to reassure (response a). If A is heard as challenging B's competence, B might refute the implication that he cannot swim well (response b). If B cannot see the point of A's ‘question’, he assumes A is leading up to something else, and via intonation asks what this is (response c). If A is heard as making a request (he might for example be looking for someone to play in a waterpolo team, or somebody to retrieve his plastic duck floating out to sea), B may agree to the request (response d). If A is heard as making a ‘genuine’ request for information as to how well B can swim (e.g. in the context of an interview for a job as a beach attendant in a summer camp), B is likely to downplay his affirmative response (to avoid bragging), but also to provide supportive evidence (response e). As this list shows, in our daily lives there are many situations in which rights and obligations are clearly different from that of the classroom, and as soon as we find ourselves in such situations, A's question itself changes its implied meaning.

In all these five cases, a response of the form ‘Yes, I can’ (unless suitably modified by intonation and other prosodic features) is unlikely to be appropriate. Further, we find it difficult to imagine contexts in which the teacher–learner exchanges given in (2) above could actually occur. We have here then a case in which the English language is being used for pedagogic purposes, but what results is a classroom-specific type of discourse. The danger is that, in

10 2 Communicative Interaction in the Foreign Language Classroom

teaching English, one is teaching something other than the English one in fact wishes to teach!⁷

The dilemma posed above by the distinction between pedagogic and target discourse can be overcome in several ways:

(1) We change our use of English in the classroom such that it better approximates to the English we aim to teach – this is possible to a certain extent. However, clearly the teacher cannot simply avoid his ratified responsibility for teaching!

(2) We draw our learners' attention to the differences such that they at least know about them – for example, it seems a reasonable procedure especially with older learners to point out before a particular exercise why it is being suggested, and what type of English is being used in the exercise. While such an explicit cognitive treatment seems certainly desirable (and ethical), it clearly leads only to talking about talk – that is, a type of metapragmatic exercise involving learning.⁸

(3) We accept the differences insofar as 1 and 2 above are (at best) only partial solutions, but seek ways and means of including samples of target discourse inside pedagogic discourse. This is, of course, what teachers have always done via the use of texts, for example. But we are here considering spoken interaction, rather than written discourse. We can, of course, play films or video-recordings in which native speakers are conversing. This may be useful but:

(a) All too often, in fact, the prepared recording is especially prepared to be used in teaching and it shows! More seriously:

(b) Such materials only help receptive skills, particularly, 'oral comprehension', and moreover the comprehension required is not that of a conversationalist, as the listener (the learner) has no interactional role: he cannot interrupt the recording to ask the speaker to repeat something, for example. He is a passive overhearer, not an active participant. Here we need to remind ourselves again that classroom learning provides a very different ritual setting from that of interaction in ordinary life, and very often it is impossible for the learner to take an active participation role in the interaction the learner examines.⁹

In sum, we are suggesting the following:

(1) In the interests of exposing the learner to target language, the teacher should attempt to reflect such language in his own pedagogic behaviour.

(2) It is potentially valuable to make explicit to the learner what he is learning, and how what he is learning relates to everyday interactional behaviour.

(3) Target discourse may be practised inside the pedagogic framework, most commonly via simulation, games, role-playing, drama and so on.