

Case grammar and its implications to developing writing skills

Abstract

This article exposes the existing controversy among researchers about the role of traditional grammar in helping students to overcome their grammatical errors. It consequently shows the relevance of Fillmore's Case Grammar to developing writing skills and improving linguistic proficiency. The strength of this semantic grammar lies in its "universalism and "generativism". It enables its users to generate an infinitude of sentences and to avoid the burden of negative transfer. It also offers new strategies to understand, analyse and criticise the novel and the short story in an objectively-satisfying manner.

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1. THE STATE OF THE ART

The word *grammar* has first begun with the Greek philosophical speculations and has come to mean "the art of speaking and writing correctly". The twentieth century, however, has brought about many doubts about the contribution of traditional grammar to the development of linguistic proficiency. As a result, some linguistic theories have been put forward to help learners to grapple with the intricacies of language. Case Grammar has become very popular because it can account for linguistic structures that cannot be accounted for by traditional, structural and transformational grammars. This is due to the fact that this theory deals with sentences without losing sight of the interaction of syntactic and semantic valency. In addition, it presents a set of semantic cases (such as agent, experience, instrumental, patient, etc.) that replace traditional labels (such as subject, object, complement, etc.). These cases play a considerable role in allowing or blocking different types of structures both at the sentence and at the discourse level .

ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال الجدل القائم بين الباحثين حول دور القواعد التقليدية في مساعدة الطلبة على تخطي الأخطاء النحوية، ويبرز مدى نجاعة قواعد الحالات لـ: فيلمور في تطوير مهاراتهم الكتابية و تحسين قدراتهم اللغوية. وتكمن قوة هذه القواعد الدلالية في كونها قواعداً "عالمية توليدية" تمكن مستعملي اللغة من توليد جمل لا حصر لها، وتجنبهم وطأة التداخل اللغوي السلبي، كما توفر لهم استراتيجيات جديدة لفهم القصة و الرواية و تحليلهما و نقدهما بطريقة موضوعية مرضية

2. THE STATUS OF GRAMMAR IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

The teaching of grammar seems to create a controversial issue among teachers, applied linguists and syllabus designers. While some of them like to teach grammar explicitly, others prefer to teach it implicitly; and still some others prefer not to talk about it at all. If grammar has been regarded as 'a taboo' and 'a sanguinary' pursuit by some linguists, it has also been overtly appreciated and warmly embraced by some others, and even the much reviled traditional grammar seems to be plainly rehabilitated.

My interest in grammar emanates from the fact that it has been totally neglected in current curricula in Algeria on the ground that it does not meet learners 'communicative requirements. But in fact, the reverse holds true : students cannot gain fluency in the target language unless they acquire a deep mastery of its grammar and an adequate awareness of the interrelationship between semantics and syntax.

I think that the teaching of grammar in general seems to be of primary importance in language acquisition. Learners cannot combine words into sentences unless they are introduced to the abstract mechanisms that govern the inherent characteristics of the language. Thus the question that should be raised here is by no means whether grammar should be taught or not, but what type of grammar to teach and how to teach it.

In his inquiry into grammar teaching in practice, Zimmerman (in P. Green and K. Hecht 1992:168) '...found that almost 80 per cent of the teachers studied were in favour of a systematic presentation of grammar and that grammar teaching occupied up to 60 per cent of the total teaching time.' Likewise, in his preface to Rutherford's *Second Language Grammar: Learning and Teaching* (1992), The editor C.N. Candlin explicitly states that 'Through grammar the learner can make words effective and become master of his own communicative environment.'

3. THE OPTION FOR CASE GRAMMAR

Nowadays, linguists -by and large - agree that teachers who are not trained in applied linguistics cannot successfully teach languages. Allen and Corder (1973: 248) go as far to say '... the problem of the language teacher is not only whether or not to apply linguistics, but whose linguistics to apply, and what sort.'

My option for case grammar proceeds from the deep conviction that this model can yield insightful penetrations, descriptive adequacy and explanatory power. And above all, it has a direct bearing on some outstanding theories:

Within grammatical theory the concept of deep cases can be thought of as a contribution to the theory of grammatical levels, to the theory of grammatical relations, to the description of the valences and collocations, and to the general theory of the functions of sentence constituents. (Fillmore 1977: 60)

Learners of English as a foreign language find it difficult to go on generating new sentences. Case grammar with its emphasis on the cohesiveness between specific verbs and their concomitant cases can familiarise learners with the different semantico-syntactic structures available in the largest language. In addition, a contrastive analysis

of Arabic and English in case grammar terms proves very useful for teachers and textbook writers. Thanks to it, teachers can make their students avoid the use of word-for-word translations, provide them with a semantic basis for the identification and choice of equivalents and caution them against false analogies.

4. WHAT IS CASE GRAMMAR?

Case grammar is a linguistic theory expounded by Charles Fillmore as a reaction against Transformational Generative Grammar. Specifically, since the publication of 'The case for case' in 1968, Fillmore has led the way to the development of such a grammar which has since been considered by linguists as one of the most well-known and revealing theories currently available.

In fact, there is no unified theory of case grammar. Fillmore himself has come up with a series of versions (1966, 1968, 1970, 1971), and the list of case grammarians is indeed a very long one, but a few of them can be mentioned here: Anderson (1971), (1977); Chafe (1970); Nilsen (1972), (1973); Cook (1973); Mackenzie (1981) ...etc.

Charles Fillmore (1968) proposed that the deep structure of any sentence consists of a MODALITY (similar to the Aux constituent in Transformational Grammar) and a PROPOSITION. The latter consists of a verb and a sequence of one or more case roles, each of which is realised as a case marker (preposition, postposition, or case affix) and a noun phrase.

Fillmore seems to have borrowed the word 'case' from Latin because the functions played by cases are mainly similar to the ones expressed in Latin declensions which display the different types of involvement that any participant may have in an action such as Nominative, Accusative, Genitive, Dative...etc. In this context, Fillmore (1968b:382) explicitly stated:

I believe that human languages are constrained in such a way that the relation between arguments and predicates fall into a small number of types. In particular I believe that these role types can be identified with certain elementary judgements about the things that go around us: judgements about who does something, who experiences something, where something happens, what it is that changes, what it is that moves, where it starts out, and where it ends up. Since judgements like these are very much like the kinds of things grammarians have associated for centuries with the use of grammatical cases, I have been referring to the case roles as case relationships, or simply cases.

In Fillmore's new version of 1970 (Cook 1970b: 18-19), the list of cases and their definitions reads as follows:

A	Agentive	instigator of the action, animate
E	Experiencer	affected by the action, animate
I	Instrumental	force or object causing action or state
O	Objective	semantically most neutral case
S	Source	the origin or starting point

G	Goal	the object or end point
L	Locative	spatial orientation of the action
T	Time	temporal orientation of the action
C	Comitative	accompaniment role, animate
B	Benefactive	benefactive role, animate

5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

As any other linguistic theory, case grammar has not been expounded in the first instance as a theory of language acquisition, but it can be adapted to language situations. Yet, the problem lies in the adaptation; that is to say in the modalities of the conversion of a scientific grammar into a pedagogical grammar and in the preparation of teaching materials. Here I do not claim that this theory is a panacea to all language problems, but I share Allen and Corder's idea (1974:94) that:

As teachers we should be prepared to study linguistic grammars of all types, and to select from the whatever seems to contribute from a teaching point of view, and to what Palmer calls a 'complete and homogeneous' system of presentation.

In this theory, language is not regarded as a habit structure but as a generative tool which enables users to generate sentences never heard before in accordance with high, abstract semantico-syntactic rules.

5.1. The verb valency

In case grammar, the predicate is regarded as the semantic nucleus in any proposition, and it is realised as a verb or an adjective in the surface structure. However, the ability to use predicates correctly in the target language requires a thorough understanding of the semantico-syntactic valency of the verb; i.e. the maximum number and type of nouns required by a specific verb. What is worth mentioning here is that the semantico-syntactic valency of any verb in Arabic is not always equivalent to that of English. That is why in a free composition, Arab students seem to be cognitively attached to the general valency of the verbs in their native language. It is this negative transfer that undoubtedly hinders them from producing certain English linguistic patterns which do not exist in their own language unless they have been already initiated to them. So a contrastive analysis of Arabic and English structures in case grammar terms seems to be of great importance to the foreign language teacher. It enables him to pinpoint the areas that may create problems to his students and to show him how he can better provide for teaching them.

The utility of case grammar is highly substantiated in this context. It can afford learners with a series of rules that play a great role in allowing or blocking different sentence structures such as subject selection and object selection at the sentence level. So, what may be subjectivized in English may not be subjectivized in Arabic, and

what may be objectivized in English may not be objectivized in Arabic and vice versa.

As far as subject hierarchy in English is concerned, case grammarians agree on the fact that if there is an agentive in a sentence, it is obviously the subject. If there is no agentive but there is an experiencer, this becomes the subject. If there is no agentive or experiencer but there is an instrumental, this instrumental becomes the subject. Finally, if there is no agentive, experiencer or instrumental, an objective or locative becomes the subject of the sentence. In short, the subject selection hierarchy is as follows: (1) agentive, (2) experiencer, (3) instrumental, (4) objective, and (5) locative.

Concerning the direct object choice hierarchies, Nilsen (1973:39), after a deep investigation, goes as far as to combine the hierarchies of Stockwell, Lambert and Fillmore to form a composite picture which reads as follows : (1) objective, (2) locative, (3) experiencer, (4) goal, (5) instrumental, and (6) agentive.

The following sentences show that English does allow instrumentals to be subjects whereas Arabic does not:

- (1) The telegram conveys the news to the president.
* naqala al-tilighra:m al-naba' ila al-ra'i:s.
- (2) Sixty dinars will buy you two novels.
* situ: na dina: ran sa tachtari laka riwa: yataini.
- (3) The loss of blood killed the victim.
* fuqda: n al-dam qatala al-dahiyata.
- (4) The hammer broke the window.
* kassarat al-mitraqatu al-na:fidata.
- (5) The knife cut the fish.
* qatta8a al-sakinu al-samakata.

Arabic also does not allow certain objectives and locatives to function as subjects. Consequently, Arab learners usually find the following English sentences as unnatural:

- (6) This book sells fast.
* al-kita:bu yabi:8u bi sur8atin.
- (7) This text reads well.
* yaqra'u al-nassu jayyidan.
- (8) The novel sold 1000 copies.
* ba: 8at al-riwa: yatu alfa naskhatin.
- (9) The car burst a tire.
* fajjarat al-siyya:ratu' ita:ra al-8ajalati.
- (10) This restaurant feeds 3000 people.
* ha:da al-mat8amu yut8imu 3000 shakhsin.
- (11) The amphitheatre seats 500 students.
* al-mudaraju yajlisu 500 ta:libin.

5.2. Case frames

In case grammar, verbs are classified according to their case frames. Cook (1971b:52-53) adopted Chafe's four basic verb types which are (1) state verbs (believe, hear, know, dry, dead...) , (2) process verbs (break, iv., die, iv., dry, iv.)*, (3) action verbs (break, tv., kill tv., dry tv. ...)* and built a matrix model of sixteen case frames. And as Fowler (1977:14) says: 'It is possible that this semantic classification may derive from innate categories of essential human perception, and so it may be universal.' Semantic classifications in general seem to be very useful for learners of foreign languages because they codify their intuitions in the generation of sentences and texts. For example, the verb 'break' may occur in different case frames such as:

- + [_____ 0]
- + [_____ A,0]
- + [_____ I,0]
- + [_____ A, I, O]

but it is said to have a single conflated case frame:

+ [_____ (A), (I), 0] in which agentive and instrumental are optional and objective is obligatory.

Because of the mother tongue interference, learners may reluctantly or unconsciously internalise only a limited number of case frames. If the English native speaker accepts the following four sentences, the Arab learner of English may accept only the first two examples:

- (12) My mother opened a can of sardines.
- (13) My mother opened a can of sardines for me with a key.
- (14) The key opened the can of sardines.
- (15) The can of sardines opened easily.

Likewise, Arab learners can produce:

- (16) We parked our car easily.

But not

- (17) Our car parked easily.

It is also worth mentioning that equivalent verbs in English and Arabic may not tolerate the same semantico-syntactic valency. The equivalent of the verb 'blame' in English is Yalu:mu in Arabic. But whereas in English the following sentences are acceptable, Arab learners of English are liable to consider the second sentence as unacceptable:

- (18) People blamed the government for the depression.
- (19) People blamed the depression on the government.

In addition, foreign language learners may confuse certain closely related verbal concepts, yet by contrasting their case frames, they will see all the finer shades of meaning. For example:

* iv= intransitive verb; tv=transitive verb

- (20) see---- [_____ + 0 + E]
(21) look ----[_____ + 0 + A]
(22) hear ----[_____ + 0 + E]
(23) listen ---[_____ + 0 + A]

In the same language, two verbs may be similar in meaning and in semantic valency, but they differ in syntactic valency. Consider Mackenzie's examples (1981:29-30): BUY and PURCHASE. While the former tolerates the beneficiary as indirect object, the latter does not:

- (24) I bought a bunch of roses for Mary.
(25) I bought Mary a bunch of roses.
(26) I purchased Mary a bunch of roses.
(27)* I purchased Mary a bunch of roses.

Similarly, GIVE and DONATE, the former may take an indirect object, but the latter not:

- (28) He gave all his money to the Salvation Army.
(29) He gave the Salvation Army all his money.
(30) He donated all his money to the Salvation Army.
(31) * He donated the Salvation Army all his money.

Although there are semantic principles that govern the combination of cases, there are many irreducible idiosyncrasies. Terry Winograd (1983:315-16) provided the following:

- (32) Cinderella broke the mirror.
(33) Cinderella polished the mirror.

Yet, the sentence

- (34) The mirror broke.

Seems to be normal while

- (35) * The mirror polished.

does not, the thing polished could be the subject in a more elaborate sentence, such as:

- (36) Silver utensils polish more easily than ones made from brass.

That is why we make recourse to case grammar, and we need very abstract semantic rules to account for all the aspects of sentence structures.

5.3. Lexical entries for verbs

By the incorporation of case frames in the dictionary entries for verbs, the learners' ability to generate new sentences will be enhanced. Without this knowledge, learners may remain baffled in their attempts to use the synonyms they find in dictionaries. So, inasmuch as lexicographers include prepositions and particles required by nouns and verbs, it is high time for them to incorporate conflated case frames for the different types of verbs.

5.4. Case grammar and literature

Among the linguists who have drawn an analogy between sentence structure and narrative structure are the French structuralists like A.J. Greimas and Tzvetan Todorov. (Cf. Hawkes 1977). Case grammar can be used as a strong basis for analysing and understanding novels and short stories. Case roles such as agentive, instrumental, patient, etc. are considered as semantic participants of the sentence structure and of the narrative structure. So, sentences may be regarded as narratives in miniatures. In the narrative, characters always play different roles: the hero may be an agent or a patient, or he may begin as an agent and terminates as a patient. The incidents, on the other hand, semantically fall into a small number of verb categories such as action, state, process and action-process.

Roger Fowler (1977:5) was determined to state that: "I shall maintain that texts are structurally like sentences, (as well as being constructed out of sentences), that is to say, the categories of structure that we propose for the analysis of individual sentences (in linguistics) can be extended to apply to the analysis of much larger structures in texts". And in fact, sentences and narratives are "codings of experience", and this is what makes them share the same semantic categories.

It is also important to signal that case grammar has been used in 'Content Analysis' and stylistic measurement by teachers, literary critics and syllabus designers. By analysing literary pieces in case terms, teachers can select appropriate texts suitable for students' levels. Students may not be able to understand English literature because they lack the appropriate skills for grasping the complex literary structures especially those of Shakespeare, Milton or Pope. The main task in the teaching of literature is to help students expand their disturbingly narrow case frames and their varied surface structure realisations.

It seems to me that in learning literature, students' difficulties lie first and foremost in form-class identification (i.e., the identification of the parts of speech). Either in their input or output, students usually rush out to adopt the commonplace form-class. And since the largest and most important class category in English is the noun-verb class such as: head, hand, house, bottle, pocket...etc, it seems reasonable and economical to make students aware of this phenomenon, especially if one knows that they generally use these words as nouns but not as verbs. The following are concrete examples:

- (37) It houses six elements.
- (38) Peter bottled the beer. (=put it in the bottle).
- (39) She powdered her face. (=put powder on it).

If in simple sentences students may easily identify word classes, in poetry this task seems to be troublesome. Consider the following:

- (40) The sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled

Students may think that 'full' and 'round' are adjectives, and if they do so, they can never guess the meaning of these lines. Here, 'full' is a nominal, and 'round' a preposition.

Word order is also as important as lexicalized roles. If the verb and the different cases appear in an unusual order at the surface structure, students may be bewildered vis-a-vis this new situation. Evidence from poetry:

(41) Bright Thames the brightest beauties yield.

(A . O. V.)

(42) The God who darts around the world his ways.

(A. V. L. O.)

(43) With hairy springs we the birds betray.

(I. A. O. V.)

So, with intensive drills on varied literary patterns, students will be accustomed to the different types of sentence structure transformations. And on their own, students may be encouraged to generate similar patterns by analogy.

To sum up, it is quite evident that teachers who are familiar with linguistic theories in general can find solutions to teaching problems better than others. In short, case grammar should not be estranged from pedagogical practice.

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