



## *Errors and Learning/Teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language: an Exercise in Grammaticology*

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Preoccupation with errors is part and parcel of any language teacher's job. While attitudes towards and ways of dealing with errors in language teaching – as well as the concept of error itself – may have changed throughout the history of language teaching, interest in the issue is alive and well to this day, as witnessed by recent contributions (e.g. Pawlak 2014, Pedrazzini 2017). The association of error and grammar is a strong one, and language teachers – particularly if they are themselves non-native speakers of the language they teach – seem to hold morphosyntactic errors as more serious than any other kind of deviation from native speaker use (Hughes and Lascaratou 1982). Linguistic, acquisitional and pedagogical notions of error do not necessarily match and pedagogical grammar books are often the site of such dialectics.

In the first part of the paper I will shed light on how errors and related concepts have been conceived of in respectively linguistics and second language acquisition research. I will then shift the focus to errors and grammar writing and introduce the genre of pedagogical grammars for EFL/ESL teachers. The last part of the paper will report on the findings of the analysis of a sample of pedagogical grammars for EFL/ESL teachers aimed at highlighting how the notions of error, grammaticality, acceptability



and correctness are viewed and operationalized in the paratextual material and the presentation of a selection of topics of English grammar.

## 1. ERRORS AND LINGUISTICS: GRAMMATICALITY, ACCEPTABILITY AND GRADIENCE

Modern linguistics has gone to great lengths to stake out its territory and to mark its difference from earlier, “prescientific” (Lyons 1968: 137) notions of ‘norm’ and ‘error’. In setting themselves a descriptive/explanatory role, linguists have focused on the ordinary (native) speaker as the source of language data. Within this perspective, language norms do not issue from self-styled ‘authorities’, but “are set by the language sovereign, i.e. the language user producing utterances in everyday speech (and writing)” (Hundt 2010: 35). Errors as deviations from norms are hence thought of primarily as departures from language-internal notions of grammaticality.

Analyzing how the several linguistic schools that have developed since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have tackled the issue of error might be the subject of a different paper. I will restrict my review to those linguistic insights that have proven to be influential in the conceptualization and representation of errors in recent grammaticography. It goes without saying that pride of place in this potted review is taken by Generative linguistics.

As is well-known, Chomsky (e.g. 1955) views the linguist’s task as providing a description of “the fluent native speaker’s knowledge of the language” (Radford 1988: 3). Such knowledge enables a native speaker to tell apart grammatical from ungrammatical sentences. Grammaticality rests on language-internal syntactic rules. A related concept put forward by early Generative grammarians is that of well-formedness as distinct from grammaticality. A well-formed (vs. deviant) sentence must abide not only by the rules of syntax of a particular language but also by those of the semantic and the phonological domains. A nonsensical (hence deviant) sentence may thus be perfectly grammatical.

Originally, Generative grammarians assumed that hypotheses about grammaticality could be tested directly through native speaker judgments (Chomsky 1957). This assumption was soon revised and a distinction between ‘competence’ (tacit knowledge) and ‘performance’ (language use) was posited. While grammaticality is directly associated with the native speaker’s idealized competence, acceptability has to do with performance, or linguistic behaviour, which can be influenced by physical and psychological limitations inherent to the processes of actually comprehending and producing language. Native speaker judgments may thus not always be reliable evidence of underlying competence:

[...] [A]cceptability judgments, like other manifestations of linguistic performance, need not be one-to-one reflections of grammaticality. [...] [I]t is always possible that the subject is not reporting directly on grammaticality but is responding to any number of other features of the stimulus (Botha 1973, Quirk & Greenbaum 1970). (Bard *et al.* 1996: 33)



James (1998: 71-72) provides a taxonomy of eight possible sources of unacceptability, which are listed below:

- Failure to fit the intended context
- The unusual, bizarre nature of the idea expressed, or reference to an inconceivable situation
- An unusual way of referring to a nonetheless conceivable situation
- Flouting customary collocations
- Producing unusual grammar or phonological configurations
- Producing hard-to-process syntactic or phonological complexity
- Upsetting the balance of sentence parts, for example excessive endweight being assigned to a sentence element of little import
- Breaking rules that are not so much natural rules 'of the language' but that have been superimposed on the language by purists.

As acceptability has to do with linguistic behaviour, the idea that it may be 'relative' and thus expressible through a scale has been "readily accepted" (Bard *et al.* 1996: 33) by Generative grammarians. Alongside the asterisk (\*), which signals ungrammaticality, Generative grammar has developed a number of symbols (e.g. ?, \*?) to account for unacceptability. Although such symbols have eventually been used (e.g. in grammaticography) to mark absolute judgments of degrees of acceptability, such use runs counter to the intentions of Generative grammarians:

Working linguists know very well, of course, that each symbol covers a range of judged degrees of acceptability, and that in practice the ranges covered by different symbols will often overlap. Sensibly enough, linguists rely more heavily on the ability of the symbols to express relative acceptability and make less direct use of their dubious relationship to absolute acceptability (Bard *et al.* 1993: 36)

The view that alongside acceptability, grammaticality should also be subject to variability – or 'gradience' – has been much more controversial in the Generative camp, although Chomsky himself seemed to hint at the existence of gradient grammaticality early on, remarking as he did that "an adequate linguistic theory will have to recognize degrees of grammaticalness" (Chomsky 1975: 131).

The term 'gradience' was introduced by Bolinger (1961), who argued that "in contrast to what the structuralist tradition claimed and what the structuralist methodology implied, linguistic categories have blurred edges more often than not, and [...] apparently clear-cut categories often have to be replaced by non-discrete scales" (Fanselow *et al.* 2006: 1). The issue of non-binary grammaticality and of 'fuzzy' grammatical categories has been one of the core principles of Cognitive Linguistics, which posits that linguistic categories share with other conceptual categories the fact that they are generated by the same process of "drawing conceptual boundaries and giving structure to an unstructured world around us" (Radden and Dirven 2007: 5). Unlike other categories, however, "linguistic expressions are typically associated with



more than one concept and tend to be vague or, to use the technical term, ‘fuzzy’ (Radden and Dirven 2007: 5). As a result of the application to linguistics of Prototype Theory, which developed from empirical investigations in cognitive psychology but is originally associated with Wittgenstein (B. Aarts 2007: 46), it is maintained that it is possible to identify prototypical members and more peripheral members of a linguistic category and that categories may resemble each other “to varying degrees” (B. Aarts and Haegeman 2006: 123). This principle is claimed to account for ‘variable’ rules and fuzzy, non-binary grammaticality.

While the rift between linguists claiming that gradience is limited to language use and those who view it as inherent to the language system is far from resolved, according to B. Aarts, writing in 2007, “there are signs that the two ‘camps’ [...] are less firmly entrenched than they have been for the last two decades” (B. Aarts 2007: 3).

## 2. ERRORS AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: ERROR ANALYSIS

Researchers who study the processes of learning and teaching a second/foreign language can hardly avoid dealing with the issue of errors (What is an error? How should errors be classified? What do errors tell us about the learner’s learning process? How do teachers respond to errors? Etc.). Since the 1960s, second language acquisition research has amassed a wealth of theoretical proposals and findings from empirical studies concerning errors. Similarly to the previous section, I will restrict my review to those aspects which are thought to have more relevance for grammaticography.

The Chomskyan conception of a speaker’s grammatical competence as distinct from their performance underpins the early interest in and attempts at scientific study of second language learner errors, which are traditionally associated with the birth of Error Analysis, in the 1960s, as a methodology for investigating second language acquisition (Ellis and Barkhuizen 2005). According to Corder’s (1967) early definition, learner errors are not all the same. Properly named *errors* stem from lack of knowledge and are hence related to competence, or rather to the learner’s *transitional* competence, while *mistakes* are due to performance factors and should thus be disregarded by Error Analysts. The language acquisition field soon departed from this dismissive view of performance-related phenomena driven by Chomsky’s glorification of the ideal native speaker. Corder himself, four years after his original paper, claimed that errors are “the result of some failure of performance” (Corder 1971: 152), while what had originally been named competence-based errors were now described as features of the learner’s “idiosyncratic dialect”, later named ‘interlanguage’ by Larry Selinker (1972). Within second language acquisition, this reappraisal paved the way for the development of Interlanguage Studies, which James (1998) opposes to the Error Analysis camp: “Second language acquisition (SLA) theoreticians study this IL (interlanguage) *sui generis*, as if its speakers were a newly discovered lost tribe in Amazonia. Error Analysts study it in relation to the TL (target language)” (James 1998: 65).



The work of Error Analysts is marked by a series of steps that Corder named as early as 1974: collection of a sample of learner language, identification of errors, explanation of errors and evaluation of errors (Corder 1974). The original aim of Error Analysis was to uncover the source of errors and what this had to say about the processes and strategies learners deploy in the acquisition of a second language. Explanation of errors was found in either interlingual or intralingual learning processes. The first type of process was said to be responsible for L1 transfer, which had until the 1960s been regarded as the sole source of learner errors. Error Analysts claimed that deviations from target language norms may also be due to intralingual processes such as over- or undergeneralization, which are also at work in the acquisition of one's native language.

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that, beyond the original identification of competence errors as distinct from performance mistakes, the effects on Error Analysis research of the linguistic insights that were reviewed in the previous section has been negligible. Various proposals of classification of errors put forward by Error Analysts (e.g. as covert or overt, Corder 1971) or according to linguistic categories or types of modification of the surface structure (Dulay *et al.* 1982) have ultimately been based on a binary view of grammaticality. Even James's (1998) four-part categorization of *deviances* seems to uphold tradition as far as the concept of grammaticality is concerned. Having said that, James's categories deserve a mention, if only for the researcher's attempt to go beyond the error/mistake dichotomy. The criteria used by the researcher to distinguish the four categories have to do with whether the subject is capable of detecting the deviant use of the language and remedy it. *Slips* are "lapses" which "can quickly be detected and self-corrected by their author unaided". *Mistakes* can be corrected by the subject but only if they are pointed out to them. *Errors* are due to lack of knowledge: they "cannot be self-corrected until further relevant (to that error) input (implicit or explicit) has been provided and converted into intake by the learner". *Solecisms* are "breaches of the rules of correctness as laid down by purists and usually taught in schools" (James 1998: 82-83). James's classification came at a time when Error Analysis had already started to be sidelined within the second language acquisition field and used as an ancillary methodology to second language studies (Ellis 2008). It has the merit of narrowing the gap between the native speaker and the second language learner. If it is still acknowledged that the adult native speaker does not make 'errors' and breaches of grammaticality are uncontroversial to detect, it is nonetheless claimed that three categories of deviances are shared by native speakers and learners alike.

In taking the target language as a baseline, Error Analysts have traditionally assumed that norms stem from the native speaker's ideal competence. This monolithic view of target language norms, however, hardly fits in with the sheer variety of language use, learning and teaching contexts and learners' needs. Even within BANA<sup>1</sup> countries, language use is far from homogeneous, and language variation depends on a complex web of factors. While this issue has been partially taken on board more

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<sup>1</sup> The acronym BANA refers to Britain, Australasia and North America (e.g. Holliday 2005).



recently, as also evidenced by Lennon's definition of learner error as "a linguistic form or a combination of forms, which, *in the same context and under similar conditions of production*, would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers' native speaker counterparts" (Lennon 1991: 182, my emphasis), Error Analysts do not seem to have convincingly come to terms with gradient *grammaticality*, which can make the process of comparison of the learner's deviant output with a native speaker 'correction' less than straightforward. More importantly, the emergence of research on language use in English as a lingua franca contexts, which studies variations from target-like norms within authentic communicative contexts (cf. Newbold 2017), ought to lead second language acquisition researchers to query the assumption that a native or nativized target language variety is always the appropriate and realistic target with which learner output should be compared. Another issue that has been raised by proponents of usage-based (Tomasello 2003) and 'complex dynamic' (Larsen Freeman 1997) theories of language acquisition is that if all language use is thought to be purposeful and learners are held to have the capacity to "expand the meaning potential of a given language, not just to internalize a ready-made system" (Larsen Freeman 2012: 301), it is often impossible to distinguish between an error and a linguistic innovation.

Despite its obvious shortcomings, the contribution of Error Analysis to the conceptualization and investigation of errors in second language learning cannot be overestimated, as pointed out by Ellis (2008: 62-63):

[...] [I]t is important not to be over dismissive of EA. It has made a substantial contribution to SLA research. It served as a tool for providing empirical evidence for the behaviourist/mentalist debates of the 1970s, showing that many of the errors that learners make cannot be put down to interference. Perhaps, above all, it helped to make errors respectable – to force recognition that errors were not something to be avoided but were an inevitable feature of the learning process.

Over the past two decades, Error Analysis research has been given a new lease of life thanks to the availability of computer-based corpora of learner interlanguage as well as sophisticated software that enables researchers to tag errors and carry out both quantitative and qualitative analyses on large amounts of data (for a recent review of learner corpus research, cf. Granger *et al.* 2015).

### 3. ERRORS AND GRAMMAR WRITING: THE FIVE ENGLISH GRAMMATICOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

Over its centuries-long history, English grammaticography has diversified and spawned a plethora of genres in response to user needs and developments in language study. Leitner (1986) identifies four major "grammaticological"<sup>2</sup> traditions since the late 18th century. The first tradition came about as the introduction of general education, the spread of industrialization and the colonization of new

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<sup>2</sup> Leitner (1984) refers to the study of grammar writing and the principles on which grammars are based with the term 'grammaticology'.





territories led to an unprecedented demand for books providing guidance on the 'correct' usage of the English language to those who aspired to take advantage of new opportunities of economic and social advancement.<sup>3</sup> Alongside these 'pedagogical' grammar books, aimed at native and/or non-native speakers, a second tradition of more scholarly works (reference grammars) attempted to apply the results of developments in language study (e.g. the historical comparative method) to the analysis of English. This second tradition moved away from the traditional grammaticographical parts-of-speech approach to focus on sentence analysis and paved the way for the reference grammars of the 'Great Tradition' (F. Aarts 1986), which kicked off with Henry Sweet's two-volume grammar (1892/1898) and continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The third tradition, which Leitner associates with the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, saw the publication of specialist grammars addressed to fellow linguists and directly moulded on specific linguistic theories, in particular late American Structuralism and Generativism, which had started to prioritize descriptive/explanatory adequacy in language research. According to F. Aarts (1986), only one English reference grammar was published in the 1945-1972 period, Long's 1961 volume entitled *The Sentence and its Parts*. The fourth tradition developed in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when grammars started to be published which broadened the base of investigation to pragmatic and textual aspects of English grammar. In this period, new genres of pedagogical grammars emerged, such as grammars specifically addressed to teachers of English as a foreign or second language (cf. below).

In his 1986 paper Leitner also points to four "challenges" which he thought were likely to occupy "future" grammar writers:

- incorporation of aspects related to texts and speech situations
- use of larger corpora, and more emphasis on spoken English
- description of non-native varieties of English
- closer adaptation of grammars to user needs and actual practices in using grammar books.

Of the four challenges, it is undoubtedly the one related to the use of larger corpora that has been most seriously taken up by grammar writers in the decades since the 1980s. Grammars based on extensive computer-based corpora of written and spoken English (e.g. Biber *et al.* 1999) may well be thought of as the fifth, more recent English grammaticological tradition.

Although there is no one-to-one relationship between each of the five grammaticological traditions and the way errors are conceived of and represented in grammar books, it is however possible to identify some overarching trends. Pedagogical grammars of the first tradition were very keen to include examples of 'bad' writing, often from authentic sources, to warn readers off 'incorrect' usage of the language (Peters 2006). Indeed, according to Sundby *et al.* (1991:1), a prescriptive grammar such as those of the first tradition is in essence "a grammar of errors". Errors

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<sup>3</sup> Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2008: 208) notes that the main aim of prescriptive pedagogical grammars for native speakers was to provide aid to "those who wished to climb the social ladder".



were said to stem from the subject's flouting of prescriptive rules rooted in tradition and self-styled authorities. Gould Brown's works are perhaps the grammar books that best embodied a moralizing function of grammar and the "popular association of grammar study with inviolable rules and, by association, with rules of propriety and morals" (Linn 2006: 77). His best-selling grammar books, such as *The Institutes of English Grammar* (1833), also featured exercises of 'false syntax' that readers were urged to 'correct'.

As the second and third traditions developed, overtly prescriptive injunctions about 'correct' and 'incorrect' usage, while not disappearing completely from grammar books, became the domain of the genre of 'usage manuals', usually organized alphabetically, such as Henry Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926). As a result of the influence of Generative linguistics on English language studies, grammar books, whether addressed to native or non-native speakers, made more extensive use of unattested examples which were meant to represent sentences that native speakers might judge 'ungrammatical'. While the use of the asterisk (\*), a metalinguistic symbol which, as Pérez Vázquez (2014) reminds us, has had a long history in philological studies and first appeared in grammaticography in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was taken up uncontroversially, less widespread was the use of the range of symbols originally devised by Generativists to signal degrees of acceptability (cf. above).

The way errors have been viewed and represented in English grammaticography has become more complex as awareness of language variation has increased over the past forty or so years. Huddleston and Pullum's (2002) grammar book uses a range of metalinguistic notations to account for variation, such as the symbol % to indicate that a sentence that is grammatical only in some dialects (of standard English) and the symbol !, which prefaces nonstandard usage. Grammars relying more extensively on computer corpora have used frequency data to shed light on acceptability and have usually been more open to the notion of gradience than previous reference grammars (Leech 2004). In their "comprehensive" grammar, Quirk *et al.* (1985), for example, claim that "assessments by native speakers of relative acceptability largely correlate with their assessments of relative frequency" (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 33). They also point out that "categories and structures [...] often do not have neat boundaries", much as "grammarians are tempted to overlook such uncertainties, or to pretend that they do not exist" (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 90).

While they have undoubtedly succeeded in representing grammaticality as less of a black-and-white notion, the grammars of the fourth and fifth English grammaticological traditions have still assumed that norms for standard English are provided by native English speakers from BANA countries. As pointed out by Leech, writing in 2004 and analysing Quirk *et al.*'s comprehensive grammar vis-à-vis Huddleston and Pullum's more recent counterpart:





In view of the growing prominence of the new Englishes of the outer circle (Singaporean, Indian, West African English, etc.) and the growing use of 'international English' as a lingua franca among non-native speakers (Seidlhofer, 2001), it is becoming more questionable today than in 1985 that native speakers' English from the 'first world' is all that a reference grammar need take note of. (Leech 2004: 128)

#### 4. ERRORS, GRAMMATICALITY, ACCEPTABILITY AND CORRECTNESS IN PEDAGOGICAL GRAMMARS FOR EFL/ESL TEACHERS

Having highlighted the main trends in the conceptualization and representation of errors in linguistics, second language acquisition and grammaticography, I shall now turn to the presentation of the findings of an analysis of the way these issues are tackled in the emerging genre of pedagogical grammars for EFL/ESL teachers.

Pedagogical grammars for EFL/ESL teachers as a genre in English grammaticography originated in North America in the 1980s (Nava 2008). At the time, demand for ESL teachers had grown exponentially as a result of increasing numbers of both foreign students who wished to pursue degrees in North American countries and immigrants who moved to North America in search of work and better living conditions. At the same time, the professionalization of the English language teaching industry had begun to gain momentum across the BANA countries. Master's courses in TEFL/TESL/TESOL<sup>4</sup>/Applied Linguistics aimed at pre-service teacher education were set up in many universities in North America, Australia and New Zealand (Liu and Master 2003), while in the UK pre-service training was usually provided by short, intensive courses held by language schools or further education colleges with a training department (Phillipson 1992).

The fact that dedicated 'grammars for teachers' did not appear until the 1980s does not mean that before that time prospective and practising English teachers had not relied on English grammar books to hone their language awareness. Indeed, particularly in continental Europe, university grammars of English had long been being used in university courses in English language and literature, which aimed to prepare language teachers alongside other kinds of English language professionals. F. Aarts (1986: 375), for example, notes that Zandvoort's grammar was the first "textbook written specifically for students of English at university level". However, although aimed at the serious student of English grammar, university grammar books did not target the specific needs of prospective or practising teachers of English as a foreign/second language and (Zandvoort 1945 being a notable exception) had little impact outside the countries where they were produced.

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<sup>4</sup> The 'T' in TEFL/TESL stands for 'teaching'. TESOL is an acronym for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. Unlike the labels (T)EFL/ESL it makes no distinction between English as a second or a foreign language. It originated in a North American context but it is now used in many other countries (Crystal 2003).



Although pedagogical in their orientation, grammar books for EFL/ESL teachers differ from school grammars in that, besides a presentation of English grammar, they seek to provide readers with a methodology of language analysis. As they are exclusively aimed at EFL/ESL teachers rather than other categories of users as well, they include a more or less extensive presentation of the methodology of teaching English grammar. Their coverage of grammar provides for both breadth and depth: exhaustive descriptions of a wide range of topics of English grammar are usually featured. The label 'pedagogical grammar books for EFL/ESL students' is thus not applicable to other grammar materials aimed at EFL/ESL teachers taking the form of 'workbooks' with language analysis tasks (e.g. Bolitho and Tomlinson 1980).

For the purposes of this study, a corpus of three pedagogical grammar books for EFL/ESL teachers published in the last 15 years has been selected.

<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Year of Publication</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Place of publication</i>
M. Celce Murcia, D. Larsen Freeman	1999	<i>The Grammar Book. An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course. Second edition</i>	Boston, USA
M. Parrott	2000	<i>Grammar for English Language Teachers</i>	Cambridge, UK
R. Cowan	2008	<i>The Teacher's Grammar of English. A Course Book and Reference Guide</i>	New York, USA

Table 1 The corpus of pedagogical grammars for EFL/ESL teachers

As shown in the table above, two of the books were published in the USA and one in the UK. All three books include descriptions of grammar topics with examples and language awareness exercises. Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1999) and Cowan (2008) also feature specific teaching suggestions for all the topics dealt with in the books. Parrott (2000) and Cowan (2008) include a self-standing section in each chapter devoted to the typical problems that EFL/ESL learners have with the topic tackled in the chapters. To ascertain how the issues of error and grammaticality, acceptability and correctness are dealt with in the corpus, the paratextual materials (introductions, prefaces etc.) and the chapter/chapters focusing on the noun phrase and subject-verb agreement in each book have been analysed from a qualitative point of view.

#### *4.1 The paratext*

The origin of the books (American vs. British) seems to be an important factor in accounting for differences in both their aims and their theoretical rationale as stated in the paratextual materials. While all three books mention that they can be used as both



coursebooks and reference books, Parrott (2000: 2), the British grammar book, primarily aims to be “a quick source of reference in planning lessons or clarifying learners’ problems”, while Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) and Cowan (2008) highlight their role as teaching materials for master’s degree courses, providing suggestions to course instructors on how to select chapters should the span of the English grammar course not be long enough to cover all the material. With regard to the theoretical rationale, both American books claim to have taken linguistic grammar as their baseline and have carried out a process of simplification and adaptation of linguistic insights to suit their prospective readers. The British book appears to have taken a different route in that it claims to have started from the oversimplified treatments of English grammar that are generally found in students’ coursebooks and grammar books and seek to provide readers with a more sophisticated view of grammatical issues.

These differences in aims and rationale are matched by differences in the way the books conceptualize not only language and grammar, but also the notion of error. As mentioned above, the American books identify linguistic grammar as their baseline, and it is clearly Generative grammar that seems to be the original inspiration for both books. Despite acknowledging their debt to the Chomskyan tradition, Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1999: 6) nonetheless claim to have taken a less restricted view of grammar, relying in their presentation of structural features on ‘transformational’ Generative grammar trees exclusively as “a very effective parsing device in analyzing sentence-level syntax”. Grammar “rules” are no longer conceived of as clear-cut either/or options. What are traditionally called ‘exceptions’ are thought of as phenomena inherent in the nature of language, language categories and grammaticality:

While rules may serve a useful purpose, particularly in meeting the security needs of beginning language learners, it is important that teachers understand that almost every linguistic category or generalization has fuzzy boundaries. Language is mutable – organic, even; therefore its categories and rules are often nondiscrete (Rutherford 1987; Larsen-Freeman 1997). (Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman 1999: 3)

This view of gradient categorization is matched by a revamped conceptualization of grammatical competence, which is not limited to formal features but includes semantic and discourse pragmatic aspects:

[...] [G]rammar is not merely a collection of forms but rather involves the three dimensions of what linguists refer to as (morpho)syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. (Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman 1999: 4)

Somewhat surprisingly, Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1999) do not deal explicitly with the notion of error, from either a linguistic or a second language acquisition perspective. However, they do refer to the fact that the “variability” inherent in language, which is a result of its nature as “both an abstract system and a



socially constructed practice” can lead to the phenomenon of “gradient, rather than absolute, judgements of acceptability; that is, certain forms sound more acceptable than others” (Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman 1999: 9). However, the paratext introduces only one metalinguistic symbol, the asterisk, along with the comment that “in this book we restrict the use of the term ‘ungrammatical’ to mean unacceptable to native speakers of English”. An example of an asterisked sentence is provided which is said to be an interlanguage sample (*\*He no say*), while its possible nonstandard English counterpart is not prefaced by any symbol (*He didn’t say nothing*). As regards prescriptive grammar rules and errors, the book claims that teachers need to be aware of what are often deemed prescriptively erroneous usages as “prescriptive grammar has its place in formal writing, at least, and students who are preparing to take standardized examinations like the TOEFL will need to know the prescriptive rules” (Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman 1999: 9).

In Parrott (2000), the paratextual material is skeletal, but a hint to a more encompassing view of grammar than the one traditionally underpinning pedagogical materials is provided. Grammar is said to be not only a matter of rules and regularities, but also a result of “choices” that speakers make on the basis of a host of different factors. For this reason, an inherent feature of grammar is said to be its “complexity” and “ambiguity” (Parrott 2000: 1). Unlike Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1999), a contrast is set up not with the formalistic linguistic tradition, but with pedagogical rules found in students’ materials, which tend to simplify and overgeneralise the facts of language by providing “rules of thumb”.

With regard to the notion of error, Parrott (2000) again is the grammar that provides the least information in its paratext. Only an indirect reference is made to the fact that pedagogical descriptions found in students’ materials may themselves be ‘erroneous’ and thus lead students to produce erroneous output – a point that is also taken up by Cowan (2008). No reference to any metalinguistic symbols used in the chapters of the book is made in the paratext.

Unlike Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1999), where the formal apparatus of Transformational grammar is conspicuous, Cowan (2008) does not feature tree diagrams or phrase structure rules. This superficial difference contrasts with the fact that it is actually the more recent book that appears to be more closely wedded to the theoretical framework of the early Generative tradition, including the Standard Theory notion of grammaticality. Cowan’s (2008) definition of grammar is couched in strictly formalistic terms (“set of rules that describes how words and groups of words can be arranged to form sentences in a particular language”, Cowan 2008: 3) and so is the book’s definition of grammatical competence:

Speakers who have successfully internalized the rules of a language and their constraints are said to possess *grammatical competence*. This means that they are able to use the rules of the language automatically to produce grammatical sentences. It also means that they are able to make accurate judgements regarding the grammaticality of the sentences they hear and read. (Cowan 2008: 5, emphasis in the original)



The native speaker's competence is hence thought of as a foolproof device that enables them to tell apart grammatical from ungrammatical sentences. While the author acknowledges the impact of discourse pragmatic constraints on language use ("discourse structuring principles that *affect* the occurrence of grammatical structures", Cowan 2008: vii, my emphasis), these appear to be external to the domain of "grammatical rules". With regard to the structure of each chapter, the author indeed notes that "in addition to the grammatical rules, issues relating to meaning and usage (including sociolinguistic factors and information-structuring principles) are treated in this section" (Cowan 2008: 9).

Cowan (2008) is the only book in the corpus that provides an extensive review of the notion of error in second language acquisition, not only touching on aspects that are key to Error Analysis research, such as the possible causes of errors (performance vs. imperfect learning errors; developmental vs. overgeneralization vs. L1 transfer errors) but also providing general guidelines on whether errors should be dealt with through pedagogical interventions or ignored (with potentially persistent errors being said to require treatment unlike transitory errors, which are thought to be taken care of by natural interlanguage development processes). The book also highlights the potential of learner corpora for error analysis and pedagogical treatment and claims that all the interlanguage samples featured in the chapters are drawn from several existing small-scale learner corpora.

While the notion of error as an acquisitional and pedagogic phenomenon is given pride of place, an explicit discussion of error as a linguistic phenomenon is lacking and what indirect information can be gleaned points to a 'traditional' view of ungrammaticality. The only metalinguistic symbol introduced in the paratext is the asterisk, denoting ungrammaticality, which, unlike in Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1999), seems to be associated with whatever nonstandard usage of the language. While reference is made to possible variability not only across dialects of English but within the same dialect, such as the use of 'would have' rather than the modal past perfect in the protasis of counterfactual conditional sentences by some speakers of American English, examples of this usage are asterisked in the introduction to the book and contrasted with 'grammatical' examples of modal past perfect conditionals. This rather conservative view of grammaticality and error seems to contrast with the explicit rejection of prescriptive grammar and its injunctions as expressed in the comment: "*The Teacher's Grammar of English* does not teach these kinds of prescriptive guidelines" (Cowan 2008: 1).

#### *4.2 Grammatical descriptions and examples*

To carry out a more in-depth investigation of the grammar books in the corpus, the chapters dealing with the noun phrase and in particular the topic of subject-verb agreement have been scrutinized. The treatment of these areas of English grammar is handled differently by each of the three books, in keeping with the overarching





differences in aims and rationale that have been highlighted above. With regard to the way the issue of error is operationalized, however, two aspects which are common to all three books emerge from the analysis. In the first place, the books refer to the notion of '(in)correctness' in commenting on example sentences, which, as has been seen above, is not mentioned explicitly in the paratext of the books. Second, despite introducing only one (Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman 1999, Cowan 2008) or no (Parrott 2000) metalinguistic symbol in the paratextual materials, the books actually rely on a wider range of symbols to preface sentences which are thought to be somehow deviant.

In Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1999), the notion of 'correctness' is clearly associated with the rules of the prescriptive canon, those represented in usage manuals. Examples of 'incorrect' usage that runs counter to the prescriptive rules but is deemed acceptable by most native speakers are not prefaced by any symbol. Where contravention of prescriptive rules results in sentences that are not thought to be universally acceptable, these are preceded by the ? symbol:

However, the desire to use formal English and be "correct" has led some native speakers to use / even as a conjoined direct object or a conjoined object of a preposition:

? This concerns only you and I.

? The article was written by Nancy and I.

? Between you and I, he's a fool.

These forms are becoming colloquially acceptable, and they are occurring with ever increasing frequency even though they are prescriptively incorrect. (Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman 1999: 305)

Readers are advised to consider not only what is 'ungrammatical' but also what is 'incorrect' when dealing with errors, particularly if they are preparing students for international exams (as prescriptive rules, at the time the book was written, were still largely referred to by the popular American-based TOEFL exam) or for use of the language in formal contexts:

Teachers should keep in mind that informal contexts permit a greater range of acceptable forms than formal contexts; therefore, they must be flexible about their correction standards, which should be different for formal writing than for informal writing or colloquial speech. (Celce Murcia and Larsen Freeman 1999: 69)

Parrott (2000) seems to use the adjective 'correct' both in its more specific meaning and to refer to 'grammaticality/acceptability'. In the commentary provided to a language awareness exercise, readers are asked to consider the sentence "[t]hey have produced several syllabuses" (Parrott 2000: 17, underlining in the original). The author comments that "[m]ost people consider this the standard and correct form" (Parrott 2000: 430).

Variation in acceptability is signalled in two ways. The author refers to what is done by 'some/most/few/many' speakers, using the first person plural pronoun 'we' to



refer to English native speakers in general: “[f]ew people use *media* as the plural form of *medium*. We generally use it as an uncountable noun meaning the press (particularly TV and radio)” (Parrott 2000: 429). The second way is the use of a range of metalinguistic symbols, which, as mentioned above, are not introduced and accounted for in the introductory sections of the book:

We use some quantifiers at the beginning of a sentence (in the *subject*), but generally avoid them in other positions.

**Much** interest was shown                      \*? They showed **much** interest                      (Parrott 2000: 55)

\*I have **much** money                      (\*) You’ll be sick if you eat **many** sweets                      (Parrott 2000: 64)

When it comes to deciding what to do with a less acceptable option, the author advises teachers to refer to the guidelines of the pedagogical canon, the “rules of thumb”:

*She was given many presents when she left her job.*

This sounds very odd, but conceivably might appear in some kind of written report. Unless the learner was a very sophisticated user of English who had chosen this form for appropriate reasons, we would probably correct this and encourage the learner to use *a lot of*. (Parrott 2000: 429-430)

In Cowan (2008), reference is constantly made to (un)grammaticality, and, alongside the asterisk, another symbol (?) is introduced in the descriptive sections to signal what is “marginally grammatical for many native speakers”:

? I have *much* money. (Cowan 2008: 194)

The adjective ‘incorrect’ is used sparingly, but, as in the example below, it is associated with usage that breaks prescriptive rules that are still thought to be largely referred to by most native speakers:

Incorrect pronouns are also used when two pronouns or a pronoun and a noun are conjoined in subject position, as shown in the sentences in (12), spoken by a college student:

(12) a. \*There’s another project that is being supervised by a graduate student and *him* and *I* are working on it.

b. \**Me* and Julie are going shopping. (Cowan 2008: 258)

It should be pointed out that the examples above, while attested in native speaker use, are asterisked in the same way that ungrammatical samples of non-native speaker interlanguage are, such as the example below:



\*The police will need a lot of additional evidences. (Cowan 2008: 15)

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Grammarians writing for an audience of prospective or practising teachers of English as a second or foreign language face a formidable task. Since the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century research in linguistics and second language acquisition as well as developments in grammaticography have accumulated a wealth of information on how errors should be conceived of, analysed and represented in pedagogical descriptions. The three pedagogical grammar books for EFL/ESL teachers that have been scrutinized for this paper differ in their stated aims and theoretical rationale. While the two American books are mainly addressed to trainee teachers on postgraduate master's courses, the British one targets the needs of more practical certificate-level courses and of practising teachers. In spite of these overarching differences, the three books all seem to provide ample evidence of the tension among linguistic, acquisitional and pedagogic views of errors and grammaticality, acceptability and correctness that makes the practice of pedagogical grammaticography particularly challenging.

While the books, in their paratextual sections, claim to depart from either traditional prescriptive grammar rules or the "rules of thumb" that make up another, pedagogic-based, prescriptive canon (Nava 2015), in the descriptive sections they often rely on the notion of 'correctness', advising readers not to disregard prescriptive guidelines in their practice. Mismatches between the presentation (or lack thereof) of metalinguistic symbols in the paratext and their actual use in the descriptive sections also points to the difficulty that pedagogical grammarians seem to experience in operationalizing the concepts of grammaticality, acceptability and correctness. Likewise, echoes of more recent developments in linguistic and acquisitional research in the corpus of pedagogical grammar books for EFL/ESL teachers do not seem to necessarily result in innovative grammaticographical practice.

Pedagogical grammar books for EFL/ESL teachers are a young grammaticographical genre. It remains to be seen whether future output will be able to make the most of insights coming from Cognitive Linguistics, learner corpus research and research into the contexts of use of English as a lingua franca, which offer new and potentially groundbreaking perspectives on the issues of errors, grammaticality, acceptability and correctness.

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