

BEING *TOUGH* THROUGH GRAMMAR¹

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1. Introduction

Whether grammar should be taught and how it should be taught is still today a matter of controversy, specially with regard to its role in the teaching of foreign languages. There are different approaches and different methodologies which divide authors involved in research concerning the teaching of grammar on issues such as explicit vs. implicit approaches to the teaching of grammar (cf. DeKeyser 1994; Mitchell *et al* 1993; Krashen 1982; Terrell 1977; Dulay & Burt 1973); or sentence-based approaches vs. text/ discourse approaches (cf. Widdowson 1983; Celce-Murcia 1991; Kramsch 1993, Nunan 1991, Hughes and McCarthy 1998; Cumming and Ono 1997; Brazil 1995).

Although it is not the purpose of this article to address such a discussion, the controversy is implicitly present in this paper due to the nature of the research carried out. The purpose of this article is twofold. On the one hand, I introduce the concept of *grammatical registers* using as the corpus of analysis a detective novel. On the other, based on that analysis, I illustrate one type of task whose purpose is to serve as a prompt for introducing the concept of grammar and for discussing with the students some relevant grammar-related issues such as teaching it implicitly or explicitly, or address the dichotomy discourse-grammar vs. sentence grammar; and the importance of the context, among others.

Thus, the underlying intention of the article is– in the line of a discourse-functional approach to grammatical phenomena (Butt *et al.* 1995, Halliday 1975, Cumming and Ono 1997)– to introduce students "to the idea of grammar as language patterning and by that implied the idea of grammar as some system that allows principled choices to be made" (Butt *et al.* 1995:vi). According to Butt *et al.* (1995) what we say or write is always a matter of exercising these

¹ I would like to dedicate this article to my dearest friend Prof. Javier Coy Ferrer, who introduced me to the American Detective Novel.

choices and designing our texts with some purpose in mind. Grammar is context sensitive (Butt *et al.* 1995, Hughes and McCarthy 1998) and differences in context result in different choices by the speakers. In this view, "grammar originates in recurrent patterns in discourse and these patterns continually shape it" (Hopper 1988, Cumming and Ono 1997). This is specially noticeable in the grammar of spoken language which is strongly influenced by pressures emerging from the demands of conversational interaction (cf. Cumming and Ono 1997).

2. What do we mean by *grammatical registers*?

As Downing (1996:11) claims "language in context is a vital concern in language teaching and students need consciously to develop an awareness of the language/ context relationship on various levels: how a particular type of text functions in society, how it relates to the language as a whole and how far the linguistic patterns revealed in a particular type of text are specific to that type of discourse." It is the linguistic patterns, in particular, the grammatical patterns– or grammatical alterations as compared with the 'standard' grammatical patterns– that emerge from the analysis of detective talk in detective novels what concerns us here. I will refer to the different patterns used by the same or different speakers in different situations as *grammatical registers*.

The term register was defined by Halliday as "a variety according to use, in the sense that each speaker has a range of varieties and chooses between them at different times" (Halliday, MacIntosh and Stevens, 1964:77; quoted in Downing 1996). Later, Halliday (1978:32) defined register as the "peculiarities of grammar and vocabulary or pronunciation which can be directly accounted for reference to the situation".

Grammatical registers are also the product of language variation in context. By *grammatical register* I understand a grammatical variety according to use, in the sense that the writer has a range of grammatical varieties and chooses between them at different times (cf. Halliday, MacIntosh and Stevens 1964:77). The use of different grammatical registers is motivated by diverse interactional factors and is a stylistic device that serves as an indicator of the functional pressures (cf. Cumming and Ono, 1997:114) that affect the characters. Thus, one way the author has of informing the reader about those pressures is by alternating between different grammatical registers.

The reason why I use the term *grammatical registers* instead of the broader term *register* is to single out grammar as opposed to pronunciation or vocabulary features. That is, the features that characterise different registers include peculiarities in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary; while in the written

genre analysed here– detective novels, and in those, the way in which *tough talk* is realised– the author chooses to alter mainly grammatical features to reproduce tough talk. Although the writer may show occasionally some variations in pronunciation (e.g. 'cause, 'xcept) and vocabulary, these seem less prominent to the reader if compared with the syntactic choices made by the speakers. Hence, it is mainly the peculiarities of grammar, i.e. the pervasively and predominantly syntactic choices that vary according to the situation and are most noticeable to the readers.

On the one hand, the term grammatical register can be used to refer to the different grammatical registers that the writer uses in reproducing spoken vs. written discourse (e.g. descriptions vs. dialogue between the protagonists of the novel). On the other hand, however, different grammatical registers are found within written detective talk. It is the second meaning of the term which interests us here. In the novel analysed, the use of one or another grammatical register by the writer in reproducing detective talk is influenced by the 'type' of character and by the interactional pressures of the moment. Two clarifications are necessary at this point:

a) First, it seems more appropriate to talk *about grammatical registers* in written rather than spoken language since the oral version of the same piece of text would probably require some alterations in the pronunciation, making it sound less formal, dialectal, etc.

b) Secondly, in written texts– a novel, for example– the use of different grammatical registers is a stylistic device serving the purpose not only of differentiating between descriptive paragraphs and dialogue. It is also a way of showing idiosyncratic ways of talk and a means of expressing the attitude or point of view of the characters, both towards a situation and towards the people interacting. Hence, grammatical registers help the reader to picture the different contexts of situation that are being emulated in the novel.

Grammatical registers could be thus attributed mainly to changes in one of the register variables: the *tenor* of discourse. The *tenor* of discourse (Halliday & Hasan 1985; Carter & McCarthy 1995; Gregory 1978) refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their status and roles. It also refers to what kinds of role relationship obtain among the participants, including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another and to both, the types of speech role that they are taking on in the dialogue and the whole cluster of socially significant relationships in which they are including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another.

In detective talk, changes in tenor often correlate with changes in the grammatical choices that the writer makes in picturing detective talk. One such change in grammatical register is specially noticeable when the detective is interacting with people related to crime, thus reproducing what is supposed to

sound like 'tough talk'. However, this register is not exclusive to the situations in which the detective is interacting with people on the wrong side of the law, but is also used between the detective and his cohorts.

In this paper, special attention is paid to the description of patterns characteristic of *tough* detective talk in one of R.B Parker's novels: *Walking Shadow*. This grammatical register is used by Spencer and his cohorts, Hawk and Vinnie with a double function. On the one hand, it is used by the detective and his cohorts in situations which require from them 'being tough'(e.g. looking for information, talking to criminals, to the police, etc.). On the other, however, the writer chooses the same grammatical register in conversations between the private eye and his associates, as a way to signal to the reader the *complicity* between them. Such a grammatical register can be characterised by an alteration of certain grammatical rules, if compared with the standard. In turn, this grammatical register shows similarities with the variety of English used by Hawk: Black English.

3. Task-Design

The idea for this article emerged after reading a few detective novels, but in particular, when I was dedicating some of my time to reading novels by R.B. Parker. This coincided with the beginning of the new academic year and I wanted to start my first class on English grammar with something that would encourage my students.

1. First I wanted to prove to them that, intuitively, they had a good **knowledge** of things about grammar.
2. That, as a result, they were able to classify and give **labels** to several features that they found in the texts analysed.
3. That grammar is not a monster that stands on its own but something present in everyday life, something that everyone is aware of and that **one intuitively masters** or has a command of (cf. Butt *et al.* 1995).
4. That grammar is not the same on all occasions but is used for communicative purposes; it is always **contextualised** and takes into consideration the social participants and, furthermore, grammar is always **negotiable**.
5. Underlying the whole of the above was to show the students that grammar is at work across the **boundaries** of the sentence or the individual speaking turn; and that grammar is more than a compedium of rules; among other things, grammar is used to **distinguish** one way of speaking and writing from another.

So the choice were texts from R. B. Parker's *The Walking Shadow*. Parker is a well-known writer in his genre. He lives near Boston, where most of his novels are situated. He teaches at Northeastern University and published his first

novel in 1974. *Promised land*, fourth in the series, won the coveted *Edgar Allan Poe Award*. He has written more than 25 books and his books have been turned into a television series with Spencer as the protagonist.

The task was designed for students to work in groups. The class was split into several groups of about three people. Each group had a different handout (I included a total of 6 different texts) which included photocopies from the novel by R.B. Parker, *Walking Shadow*. The same task can be designed using different corpora in which differences in registers are found. Some of the contemporary American detective novels (e.g. Elmore Leonard's writing also shows similar patterns) seem to coincide in using a similar grammatical register when characterising detective talk or rather *tough talk*.

Previous to the analysis, the students are given some information about the characters who appear in their handouts and informed about the plot of the novel and the relationship between the characters. Thus we have, in this case:

DeSpain: Head of Portland (Boston) police department

Spencer (*I*-narrator): private eye. Works in Boston

Hawk and **Vinnie:** Spencer's friends. Work with him

Susan: Spencer's girlfriend

Mei Ling: Chinese girl acts as a translator between Spencer and people in Chinatown.

Eddie: his sister's husband (Chinese) was killed

Jocelyn: theater actress involved in the case

How do we introduce the activity?

We have two choices with regard to the type of exercise. Each of them varies according to how much you want to guide them: guiding the student towards the information that we are looking for, or making it an almost free-comment task. Thus:

1. The type of exercise or question to be asked may be as simple as: 'Comment on the use of grammatical features in the fragment/s. Point out or comment on anything you may find interesting'.

Or you may instead want to guide the student towards listing the features that characterise 'tough' talk, by asking them to pay attention only to those dialogues in which Spencer talks with Hawk, De Spain or any of the 'baddies' in the book.

2. After having listed the features, ask them to organize and/or group those features under different headings.

Selection of texts

Whatever your choice, make sure that the texts for analysis illustrate different situations and a wide variety of grammatical registers. The texts should be selected according to the features you want to pay attention to. Designing the exercise hence implied: choosing texts which illustrated a wide variety of grammatical features: spoken and written contexts, speech and writing, and formal and informal usage. The texts selected were: Text 1. (44-47): Conversation between DeSpain and Spencer; Text 2. (76-77): Conversation between Spencer and Hawk; Text 4. (78-79): Conversation between Spencer, Hawk and Jocelyn; Text 5. (244-245): Conversation between Mei Ling, Eddie and Spencer; Text 6. (248-249): Conversation between Spencer, Hawk and Jocelyn. All the texts combine dialogues with descriptions.

4. What features are characteristic of the grammatical register 'being tough'?

The results of the analysis shows a list of features which in my opinion characterise 'toughness'. I will concentrate, mainly, on sentence level structures, although at discourse level I will point out some characteristics which are likely to emerge from the comparison between the texts:

- A. Sentence Level features
- B. Discourse Level features

4.1. Sentence Level features.

At sentence level, toughness is characterised by the use of ellipsis. That is, we can find almost all possible examples of omission of constituents in the sentence as characteristic of *tough talk*. Let us see some examples.

a) Subject omission:

Pronouns

- [I] Just need to shove sort of hard
- [I] Don't know much more than you do. [He] Studied acting in NY. Was in some plays I never heard of. Got a job up here. Kept to himself. Stayed out of trouble(44)
- [You] Won't have to lift a finger
- [he] Told me to stay away from his wife
- [he] Told me to stay away out of Port City too
- [he] shoulda come down the street at normal speed, windows up
- [it] Usually is
- [it] wouldn't be how I'd do it
- [they] Kill anything

Omission of introductory subject

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[there's] No record of him ever being fingerprinted
[there's] [a] Lot of that going around
[that is] [a] Lucky thing too
[there's] [a] Lot of that going around too

b) Subject + verb omission

Told me to stay away from his wife
Told me to stay out of Port City too
Why [should] somebody driving [be driving/ drive] in the rain with the window down?

c) Omission of main verbs

'Cause I [am/ have] a bad blabbermouth → Hawk

d) Auxiliary verbs

You been a cop → Hawk
You [are] saying that a lot → Hawk

e) Questions

e.1. Statements as questions. With or without a final question mark (?)

It was about something?
You know about one?
You think it's a tong thing?

e.2. Question-auxiliaries

Keeping your hand in?
You know about one?
Anybody fill the bill?

e.3. Auxiliary + Subject

[do you want] Want a printout?
[are you] Keeping your hand in?
[he is] Awful worried 'bout his wife

e.4. One-word questions Auxiliaries+ Subject+ main verb.

[have you got any] Prints?

e. 5. Question marks omitted

What's new [?]

f) Verb tenses

If he do, can I have your donut? → does/ did
We be dead now → We would be dead now
Be hard → it will be hard
Ever hear the name? → has he ever heard the name?

g) Prepositions omitted

[in a] Couple [of] years
[he] shoulda come down the street at normal speed, [with the] windows up

h) Articles/ determiners

[the] List may need an update (46)
[those] Kids don't give a shit (76)
[he] shoulda come down the street at normal speed, [with the] windows up (...) [the] Shooter shoulda been in [the] back. [the] Driver shoulda hit the rear-window button and the shooter shoulda opened up as it went down → Hawk

i) Conditionals

[if] You learn anything, you'll dash right on in here and tell me about it
[if] I find something, I'll let you know
[if] Course they [were] really going to do it right (...) [they] Shoulda walked in and opened up → Hawk

Who talks tough in the novel?

The characteristics described above appear mainly in men's dialogues: in conversations where the detective and his associates, the police and the people on the wrong side of the law are present.

4.2. Discourse Level

At discourse level, since the texts combine parts of the book which are trying to emulate spoken language with parts narrated by the writer, the students will probably notice many differences. Among those I would pay attention to descriptions included both in spoken– that is, descriptions supposedly uttered by the characters; and in more descriptive parts.

Descriptions within dialogues: spoken

Ellipsis is also present in descriptions of places or people included in dialogues. Additionally, the information is presented in small chunks, which sometimes repeat the same structure. This stylistic device is a way of imitating spoken descriptions as they appear in real conversations. Carter *et al.* (2000: 126) claim that in spoken English information can be built up around headword nouns more gradually and in smaller chunks. Example:

Don't know much more than you do Studied acting in NY. Was in some plays I never heard of. Got a job up here. Kept to himself. Stayed out of trouble. Sound like we're closing in? (44)

Thinks he's a Ninja assassin. Buys a ticket. Walks in the front door, puts on

his mask, works up his courage, does the deed. (45)

[he] Told me to stay away from his wife/ (...) [he] Told me to stay away out of Port City too

Descriptions in the novel: written

The descriptions in dialogues– by the characters– contrast clearly with those pieces of descriptions by the narrator or writer himself. R.B. Parker's style in this novel is characterised by the use of relatively short sentences; in turn, these detailed descriptions include a large number of adjectives and a frequent use of use of complex pre and postmodification.

There was a bathroom directly opposite the front door, a two-stride hallway to the right that led into a bed-sitting room with a huge black-and-white theater poster filling the far wall, and some gray light coming wearily from the single dormer window. The poster was of Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The bed was one of those oak platform deals with storage drawers underneath. There was a green Naugahyde arm chair, and a gray metal desk and chair. At the foot of the bed was a gray metal foot locker. The walls were white, but an old white that hadn't been washed very often. (139)

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the pieces of dialogue from the novel by R. B. Parker seem to indicate that the author is using a specific *grammatical register* syntactically characterised by omission of certain features which belong mainly to closed classes such as auxiliaries, prepositions and articles. This grammatical register seems to appear bound to situations in which the detective is interacting with:

- a) People who work with him, his cohorts
- b) People involved in the case he's working on or people on the wrong side of the law.

Such a grammatical register contrasts with some others in the book and seems to be the result of a change in field and tenor. The grammatical register 'being tough' is in clear contrast with others used by other characters in the novel. Thus, for example in the dialogue with the Chinese girl, who is acting as a translator (p.244), the fact that she is a woman and Chinese is showed by the writer with a hypercorrectness in the language used by the girl. Her grammatical register is more similar to the grammatical register used by women in general in the novel. Women in the novel tend to be slightly more 'grammatically correct'; and so is the tendency in the grammatical register used by people involved in the case but having nothing to do with crime or law and order.

The grammatical register described here was identified as representa-

tive of *tough* talk. Nevertheless, this register has still another function: it tells the reader about the complicity between Spencer and his cohorts. The fact that they can reproduce *tough* talk and use it among themselves shows that they are both part of the same world, and that they know each other well. Because of the double function of this grammatical register, the fact that the detective and his friends use it turns theirs into an example of a continuous customary joking relationship (Gregori *et al.* 1998, Norrick 1994). That is, no matter how dangerous a situation they are in, they will always 'joke' about it, and adopt a relaxed attitude towards it, which seems to be part of 'being tough'. The way to do so is by using the grammatical register described in this paper, which reproduces an example of careless, and at the same time relaxed and *tough* speech style.

The conclusions reached here are, however, tentative, since I believe that the claims made in this paper need to be studied in detail and contrasted with a larger corpus.

6. Further discussion

The purpose of this paper was, however, twofold. One was to introduce the term *grammatical register*. The other was pedagogical and, as argued at the beginning of the article, this task was designed to be used as a prompt to discuss some grammar-related issues. I will mention but a few.

1. The type of task could serve as an introduction to the implications that teaching grammar explicitly or implicitly may have since one could argue in favour of giving the students exercises of this type and then explain the rules or viceversa. The choice on my part would be to follow the 'middle road' for the explanation of grammar, that is, one which not only combines inductive with deductive methods, but one which necessarily combines sentence-based approaches with discourse

As Butt *et al.* (1995) state, you can talk about the grammar patterns of clauses and you can talk about the grammar patterns of whole texts. It is all a matter of perspective. This exercise was designed in order to make students aware of the grammar patterns of texts. Thus, bringing in the insights from pragmatics and discourse analysis in order to make the students aware of what the term grammar should include (Hughes and McCarthy 1998; Celce-Murcia 1991, Kramsch 1993, Nunan 1991, Widdowson 1983) was essential.

2. As learners of English as a second language, it would be interesting to analyse the readers perception of these paragraphs. That is, how much 'work' must the reader do in interpreting this grammatical register in particular? It is obvious that in order to recognise that there is ellipsis, one should have some

knowledge of the structures or features which have been ellipted. Thus, the question: is this a book we would recommend for any level? How proficient should students be?

3. Individual features. The use that the author makes of each of the individual features, verb tenses, prepositions etc. could be taken as a departure point in order to explain each of them.

To sum up, the purpose of using this kind of task as an introduction to grammar is not so much an entirely discourse-based approach to grammar learning and teaching, as may be inferred, but a middle position which would combine tasks such as the one being described in this article with other more 'traditional' tasks such as constituent analysis, gap-filling, etc. This kind of approach emerges from my own experience in teaching grammar in the classroom, which has proved that— in the line indicated by Carter *et al.* (2000:viii)— "grammatical rules can sometimes be best explained by means of a single sentence and a rule which can then be applied to other examples. Sometimes it is helpful to learners for the sentence to be invented or for the authentic language to be modified in order to illustrate the rule."

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