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"BLACKPOOL WOULD BE A NICE PLACE UNLESS THERE WERE SO MANY TOURISTS" – SOME MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ENGLISH GRAMMAR*

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Introduction

A few years ago, when I was working at a Polish university, I asked some 5th year students to devise a small test around one area of grammar. One student, whose area was conditional sentences, came up with the following sentence, which was to be transformed into another with IF:

(1) *Blackpool would be a nice place unless there were so many tourists.*

I puzzled over this for some time, for though it seems structurally correct, I couldn't attach any meaning to it. The intended meaning is clear, however, if we carry out the transformation:

(2) *Blackpool would be a nice place if there weren't so many tourists.*

When I pointed out the problem with interpreting (1) he was able eventually, by exploiting his intuitions, to appreciate my doubts, but couldn't understand why the rule UNLESS = IF NOT didn't apply. By this stage my concern was aroused; if one of our best students entertained such a misconception about English grammar, might this be just the tip of the iceberg? Might not students be prone to a whole range of them? I resolved to investigate.

The Research

After some deliberation it was decided that the best way of finding out about the extend of problem was via a questionnaire asking students to respond to certain

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statements about English grammar[1]. Accordingly, a pilot version was devised, administered to a small group of students and checked by colleagues; from this evolved the final version, which is shown below.

It consisted of ten statements. The first two were intended as distractors; by lulling the respondents into a sense of ease (the first was clearly right, the second clearly wasn't) it was hoped they would hide the real purpose of the exercise (an aim which it seems was achieved). The eighth statement was also meant to serve this purpose. Other statements which were originally included as distractors were found to be problematic and so were incorporated into the questionnaire proper.

The seven statements that were the object of the study were chosen from beliefs that were known to be current among English language learners, even though there is an awareness among grammarians that they are false; they included such well-known issues as conditional sentences, reported speech, the difference between SOME and ANY, and so on. Obviously, there are more than seven potential misconceptions about English; these ones were partly chosen as a sample, to give an indication of how extensive the problem of inaccurate beliefs is.

Four possible responses were offered: 'true', 'partly true' (which allowed respondents to agree with the statement in general while being aware of exceptions), 'false', and 'don't know' (which catered for the possibility that they were unfamiliar with them).

What was the interest then was how many respondents would accept these statements as true. It should be stressed here that it is not pedagogic viability that is stake but simply the truth (or falsehood) of the statements (hence the 'partly true' option), though this is a point that will be taken up again. 50% 'true' responses was taken in advance to be a significant amount, a point at which each individual misconception could be considered cause of concern.[2]

The questionnaire was administered to two distinct groups: firstly, to 44 3rd and 4th year students from the English Department of Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland, and then later on, for the sake of comparison, to 32 3rd and 4th year students from the English Department of Janus Pannonius University, Pécs, Hungary. No name was required from the students in order to prevent then from feeling they were under personal stress.

[1] An alternative would have been to use grammaticality judgements, but it would not have been clear whether learners were using intuitions to respond or metalinguistic formulations.

[2] Other misconceptions that have been suggested are:
'EVER is only used with the present perfect.'
'AS IF must be followed by a past tense.'
'THEY cannot have a singular antecedent.'
'ALWAYS never occurs with the present progressive.'

The Questionnaire

Look at the statements about English grammar below. In the space provided after each one write whether you think the statement is TRUE or FALSE; if you are not sure, write DON'T KNOW; if you think the statement is only PARTLY TRUE say so, and try to explain why, or give an example.

1. The words HARDLY and HARD, although similar in form, are not related in meaning.
2. The comparative of adjectives is formed by adding '-er' to one-syllable words and 'more' to words of two or more syllables.
3. In type one conditional sentences, WILL does not occur in the IF clause.
4. UNLESS has the same meaning as IF+NOT (attached to the verb).
5. In negative and interrogative sentences ANY should be used instead of SOME.
6. In type two conditional sentences it is wrong to use WAS in the IF clause; WERE must be used instead.
7. In reported/indirect speech, the past tense should be changed to the past perfect tense if the introductory verb is in the past tense.
8. After verbs of perception (FEEL, TASTE etc.), adjectives and not adverbs are used as complements.
9. The first time you mention a countable noun you use the indefinite article; the second time, the definite article.
10. The verb WANT does not occur in progressive/continuous forms.

(The text does not include the gaps left for responses.)

Why are they wrong?

Perhaps a brief word is necessary here about why these statements cannot be considered true. We'll look at the seven statements (that is, excluding the three distractors) one by one. Statement 4, which seems to be widest held misconception, will be given a separate section below.

3. In type one conditional sentences, WILL does not occur in the IF clause. This does not hold water as there are many instances where WILL does occur:

(3) If you will buy the food, I will get the drink.

(4) If you will go out when your hair's wet, it's no wonder you catch a cold. (WILL is stressed)

5. In negative and interrogative sentences ANY should be used instead of SOME. It is well known that SOME can occur in interrogatives:

(5) Would you like some coffee?

As Lewis (1986:18) points out: "Positive/negative has nothing to do with the choice of SOME or ANY. The choice is not a matter of structure, it is a matter of meaning."

6. In type two conditional sentences it is wrong to use WAS in the IF clause; WERE must be used instead. It is generally accepted now that it is perfectly possible to use WAS (except in fixed phrases like 'If I were you'); WERE is more likely in formal speech (Quirk et al. 1985:158; Swan 1980: point 580):

(6) If I were/was rich, ...

7. In reported/indirect speech, the past tense should be changed to the past perfect tense if the introductory verb is in the past tense. There are numerous cases where this 'rule' does not apply, or where it is optional:

(7) 'It was built last year.' → He said that it was/had been built last year.[3]

9. The first time you mention a countable noun you use the indefinite article; the second time, the definite article. This formulation is far too simple as it ignores the frequent cases where THE is used for first mention, or where A persists in the second mention (Berry 1991):

(8) Pass the butter, please.
(9) Jonny wants a bike for Christmas, but I'm not sure a bike is a good idea.

Chalker (1984:53) sorts out this misconception:

> It is not true, as is sometimes stated, that the indefinite article is always used for 'first mention' and that the definite article is used subsequently for reference back ...

10. The verb WANT does not occur in progressive/continuous forms. This is clearly not so since it is possible to say:

(10) I've been wanting to meet you for ages.

The problem with UNLESS

The questionnaire established (see below) an almost blanket belief among the Polish students that UNLESS equals IF plus NOT (i.e.,that it is the negative of IF). This is an association that a number of pedagogic grammars help to from; Thomson and Martinet (1986:203) and Leech and Svartvik (1975:97), for example. And at first sight there seems to be some justification for it, for there is a rough equivalence of meaning and function in sentence like (11) and (12):

[3] We should not be blinded by the debate over such rules into thinking that indirect speech is anything but a pedagogical fiction. When we use English normally we do not take a previously heard sentence and transform it according to certain rules; it is the meaning that we recall and report. And as Swan says (1980: point 534.5): "It is quite unnecessary to learn complicated 'rules' about reported speech, or to practise changing direct speech to reported speech".

(11) Unless you start at once you'll be late.

(12) If you don't start at once you'll be late.

But one can begin to see a difference, not just in emphasis, in cases like (13) and (14):

(13) We'll take the car if it rains.

(14) We won't take the car unless it rains.

In (14) rain is the only condition which could lead to the taking of the car; in (13) other causes are not excluded. Moving on, we have clear differences in meaning and implication between sentences (15) and (16), and (17) and (18):

(15) I'll call you unless I can go. (= I don't think I'll be able to go, so I'll probably call you.)

(16) I'll call you if I can't go. (= I think I'll be able to go, so I probably won't call you.)

(17) I couldn't have made it on time unless I'd had an executive jet.

(18) I couldn't have made it on time if i hadn't had an executive jet.

In (17) 'I' was successful because of the jet; in (18) 'I' didn't make it.

Beyond this there are examples where the corresponding sentence with UNLESS is unacceptable, as (20) and (22) below, and, of course, the title sentence:

(19) If you hadn't studied hard, you'd have failed the exam.

(20) *Unless you had studied hard, you'd have failed the exam.

(21) I'll be surprised if he doesn't have an accident.

(22) *I'll be surprised unless he has an accident.

(Taken from: Thompson and Martinet (1986:203) (11) and (12); Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983: 350-351) (15)–(18); Quirk et al. (1985: 1093 (19) and (20); Swan (1982: point 610) (21) and 22).)

As Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman point out (1983:350):

> Both ONLY IF and UNLESS mark conditions that are exclusive; i.e., there is no other condition that will bring about the stated result. IF and IF...NOT, on the other hand, express weaker or more neutral conditions in that they do not exclude the possibility that other conditions might also bring about the same result.

And they conclude (1983:351) "that ESL/EFL teachers should refrain from teaching UNLESS as the equivalent of IF...NOT." We will return to the problem of how to introduce UNLESS later.

	True	Partly true	False	Don't know
1. (HARDLY and HARD not related)	43	0	1	0
2. (forming the comparative of adjectives)	6	34	3	1
3. (no WILL in conditionals type 1)	9	26	9	0
4. (UNLESS = IF + NOT)	43	0	1	0
5. (ANY not SOME in negatives etc.)	16	24	4	0
6. (WERE not WAS in conditionals)	10	18	16	0
7. (past to past perfect in reported speech)	16	26	2	0
8. (adjectives after perception verbs)	24	8	9	3
9. (first mention A, second mention THE)	33	11	0	0
10. (no progressive with WANT)	30	4	8	2

Table 1: Raw results: Polish students (N = 44)

	True	Partly true	False	Don't know
1. (HARDLY and HARD not related)	29	1	2	0
2.. (forming the comparative of adjectives)	3	24	5	0
3. (no WILL in conditionals type 1)	28	3	1	0
4. (UNLESS = IF + NOT)	16	1	12	3
5. (ANY not SOME in negatives etc.)	22	10	0	0
6. (WERE not WAS in conditionals)	10	7	12	3
7. (past to past perfect in reported speech)	27	5	0	0
8. (adjectives after perception verbs)	22	2	4	4
9 (first mention A, second mention THE)	8	7	9	8
10. (no progressive with WANT)	23	2	4	3

Table 2: Raw results: Hungarian students (N = 32)

	Poles	Hungarians	Both
3. (no WILL in conditionals type 1)	20	*88*	49
4. (UNLESS = IF + NOT)	*98*	*50*	*78*
5. (ANY not SOME in negatives etc.)	36	*69*	*50*
6. (WERE not WAS in conditionals)	23	31	26
7. (past to past perfect in reported speech)	36	*84*	*57*
9. (first mention A, second mention THE)	*75*	25	*54*
10 (no progressive with WANT)	*68*	*72*	*70*
TOTAL	***51***	***60***	***55***

The figures represent the percentage of respondents who thought the statements were true. Statements 1, 2 and 8, the distractors, are not included. (Figures in italics are those which qualify as cause for concern under the 50% criterion.)

Table 3: Comparison: Polish and Hungarian students.

Discussion of results

Given the generally high percentages of TRUE responses shown above, the suspicion that misconceptions about English grammar are rife can be taken as a valid one. The overall figures of 51% for Polish students and 60% for Hungarians support this, as do many of the individual figures. Amongst the Poles misconceptions 4, 9 and 10 were found to be cause for concern according to the 50% criterion (at 98%, 75% and 68% respectively); amongst the Hungarians misconceptions 3, 4, 5, 7 and 10 were found to be significantly held (at 88%, 50%, 69%, 84% and 72% respectively). Out of all the misconceptions, only statement 6 appears to be under 'control', probably due to the amount of attention it has received over the years; even so it has persisted among approximately one quarter of this population.

The difference between the two overall totals, that is, the fact that the misconceptions are more widespread among the Hungarian students, may be a reflection of their slightly lower proficiency in English, or rather the less sophisticated rules of thumb that they have been exposed to. There certainly seems to be less familiarity with exceptions to the rules, as evidenced by the lower number of PARTLY TRUE responses for the seven misconceptions overall: 17% as opposed to 35% for the Polish students; statement 4 in particular was seen as either TRUE or FALSE. (The one statement for which there was a high PARTLY TRUE vote, statement 2, was of course a distractor.) This is matched by a higher overall figure for DON'T KNOW: 9% for the Hungarians versus 2%.

Turning now to individual comparisons, we can see that there are large differences between the TRUE figures for misconceptions 3, 5 and 7, where the Hungarian figure is higher, and 4 and 9, where it is lower. In general these discrepancies must be attributed to different pedagogic treatments accorded the two groups and to the different books available; there is no intrinsic reason why one misconception should be more prevalent in one place than another.

One difference, however, does make sense in contrastive terms, namely statement 9. Hungarian, like English, has an article system (whereas Polish does not), and although there are differences in patterning, the usage to which this rule unsuccessfully refers is the same in both languages; therefore Hungarian learners of English should have no need for such an explicit rule, and this is borne out by the results. However, the number of Hungarians students who were familiar with this rule (25%) is still worrying, for it suggests that they have been exposed to inappropriate materials (i.e.,those designed for learners from other L1 backgrounds); for them learning this rule is at best a waste of time.

On the origin of misconceptions

A number of sources can be posited for these misconceptions teaching and reference materials such as textbooks and pedagogic grammars, teachers all have possibly made a contribution in varying measure, reinforcing one another; it would be hard if not impossible to be precise. In the case of university students, it is

common to have a course in explicit grammar, and the influence of the particular text may be reflected in the misconceptions held by that group.[4]

But whatever the source, we still need to ask why such misconceptions exist. A number of causes can be identified:

a) *structural expediency.* In order to teach a new structural item, materials writers often have recourse to previously-taught items for a basis. Thus the third conditional is based on the second which was based on the first, the passive is based on the active, SINCE and FOR with time expressions are taught alongside each other, SO + ADJECTIVE + THAT is equated with TOO + ADJECTIVE + INFINITIVE, and so on. This search for structural building bricks is at least partly responsible for the identification of UNLESS as the negative of IF and of ANY as the negative and interrogative counterpart of SOME. Leaving aside the question of whether such juxtaposition of structures is helpful rather than confusing, there is the problem of learner motivation; if both structures mean the same, why bother learning both? But of course, as we have seen, there are cases where they don't mean the same, where they aren't just structural equivalents. In fact, if structural expediency is required, there is a much better source for UNLESS, namely EXCEPT IF, as pointed out in Murphy (1985:82). Here is sentence (14) so transformed:

(23) We won't take the car except if it rains.

The fact that EXCEPT IF sounds clumsy here gives all the more reason for replacing it with UNLESS.

b) *prescriptive accounts.* We are still prone to traditional, prescriptive accounts of English which are based on what self-appointed authorities think English should be like, rather than an accurate description of what it is like. Prescriptive rules create an expectation of complete correctness, rather than tendencies; this may be reinforced by attitudes held by the learners about their L1.

Historical changes are often ignored in prescriptive grammar. The so called 'subjunctive' in English, which has no systematic synchronic function, has survived in this way. The rearguard action that is being fought over misconception (6) (WERE not WAS) also comes into this category (see Quirk et al. 1985:14).

c) *backwash from testing.* Discrete-point tests such as multiple choice require language that is black and white, either right or wrong. Hard pressed testers may fasten onto misconceptions resulting from other causes and

[4] In another study, I asked Polish students to list all the rules for the definite article they could remember (Berry 1989); most citations, though not all, were derived from the grammar book they had used, Thomson and Martinet (1986); interestingly, the rule for 'second mention', no. (9) above, was the most common.

thereby perpetuate them; a vicious circle is created whereby the innaccuracy is taught because it will be tested, and tested because it has been taught. This is the worst possible example of negative backwash. What advice can one give to teachers who have students facing such a test? Clearly students should be thought to play the game, but nobody should be under the misapprehension that this is English.

d) *pedagogical simplification.* This is cited as a justification for many inaccuracies, such as rules for back-shifting in indirect speech which ignore 'exceptions'. Some simplification is certainly necessary; the question is: how much? In some cases it surely goes too far, such as misconceptions (7) (past to past perfect in reported speech) and (9) (first mention A, second mention THE), where the formulation is so innacurate as to be inappropriate for any learners. In other cases where the exceptions are marginal, such as statement (10) (no progressive with WANT), the simplification may be acceptable, but it depends who it is for; one can imagine that more advanced learners would be ready for exceptions (see Close, quoted by Lewis 1986:22).

e) *laziness amongst pedagogic grammarians.* Many pedagogic grammars seem to carry over the faults of other; the reason for this would appear to be that their writers have only referred to other such grammars. The result is the perpetuation of inaccuracies and over-simplifications. The information in one pedagogic grammar can only be considered 'right' in terms of the audience it is intended for (if indeed that); it cannot serve as source material for other grammars. To simplify the simplification, or adapt the adaptation, leads to nonsense. It is necessary to refer back to the original, via some scientific description of English; Quirk et al. (1985) offer such a source. And in cases where scientific grammar fails us, there is a time-honoured tradition of pedagogic grammarians using their own insights derived from long practice and experience; this is justifiable if it is done systematically (see Swan 1980 and Lewis 1986 for good examples of this). In short I am saying that pedagogic grammar needs to be seen as a *process* as well as a *product*; if there is a fault in the process (e.g., the wrong source is used), there will be a fault in the product.

Folk English

The overall result of all this is the establishment of a rival form of English; we could call it 'Folk English', but this sounds too positive. As Quirk et al. (1985:7) say:

> Countries where English is a foreign language may develop, to some extent, independent prescriptive norms that are enshrined in handbooks and textbooks and that are reflected in examination questions.

While such a situation needs treating with caution, it is surely the task of those involved in English teaching to point out where such norms diverge from the target variety of English that has been selected.

We also need to make a distinction between two types of grammar, as McArthur (1983:73-75) does. There is the grammar inside our heads, what we know unconsciously, which McArthur calls 'primary' or 'natural' grammar; then there is 'secondary' or 'analytical' grammar, which is "the product of a self-analysing civilization" (1983:74-75); that is, the attempt to codify the primary grammar. What we have with 'Folk English' is a secondary grammar only loosely related to a primary one; a codification looking for a language. To paraphrase the well-known saying:

> C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas l'anglais.

Do misconceptions matter?

Does it matter if learners get the wrong picture? The first answer must be that there can be no justification for knowingly giving inaccurate information. On the other hand, perhaps such formulations help learners to organise their learning of the item (in the manner of Seliger's (1979) 'acquisition facilitators'), and can then be discarded.

There are problems with this position, though. Firstly, if the formulation is grossly misleading it may actually conflict with input and interfere with acquisition (or worse, lead to incorrect acquisition). Secondly, learners do not always seem to discard such formulations; if anything they focus on them as the target of their learning rather than as the means. As Close says (quoted in Lewis 1986:18): "Oversimplified rules will often remain firmly embedded in the learner's mind". A rule may even be retained in a form that is further simplified.

Thirdly, learners may find exceptions to the rule (e.g., where SOME does occur in an interrogative) and lose confidence in their teacher or materials. Maule (1988) gives the extreme case of a student who encountered a sentence which didn't conform to her limited experience of conditionals ('Sorry, but if he comes, I go') and refused to accept it.

In addition, one wonders why a certain rule is needed in one place but apparently not in another, as we saw in the differences between the Polish and Hungarian students.

However, the real concern must be for learners who will go on to be teachers, such as the students in the research. While misconceptions held by other learners will eventually die out, those held by teachers will be perpetuated as they pass them on to their learners as 'absolute' rules, or design teaching materials and tests based on them. This is where the main task of reform needs to be carried out. Trainee teachers need to be made aware that the rules they are given as learners do not necessarily reflect some objective but are pedagogical devices, with all the imperfections and compromises that those entail. In short, teachers need to appreciate the diference between primary grammar and secondary grammar, and, as varieties of the latter, between scientific grammar and pedagogic grammar. As

Lewis (1986:22) says: "teachers need to make a clear distinction between grammatical rules, and clasroom hints."

What to do about misconceptions?

Firstly and most obviously, we need to point out mistakes in tests and inaccuracies and over-simplifications in pedagogical grammars, wherever they occur. While some simplification is permissible with learners, we need to make sure that it does not turn into misconceptions held by teachers. Even if we can't give teachers the 'whole truth', at the very least we can make them aware that what they do have is a pedagogic simplification.[5] Only in this way will we be able to dispense with 'Folk English'.

Beyond this we need to examine the theoretical question of the role of metalinguistic information in the classroom. There are some who see no place for it; others who see only a limited usefulness (e.g., Seliger 1979, in the form of simple rules; yet others (e.g.,Sorace 1985) who accord it a significant role under certain conditions. Whatever the answer (and surely we most agree that there are certain learners in certain contexts who can benefit from it), there is no justification for giving metalinguistic information that is inappropriate and incorrect.

We should also bear in mind that rules of thumb and other metalinguistic formulation are not the only techniques for teaching grammar. If the results of the questionnaire suggest one thing, it is that we should be wary of using rules in isolation; there is a vast range of possibilities which can be used to reinforce rules. As Rutherwood and Sharwood-Smith point out (1985:275): "The provision of 'rules of thumb' ... is the extreme end of what is really a continuum."

One reason for the unpopularity of grammar teaching in certain quarters may simply be that it has been done badly, not that it is wrong per se. Identifying and rooting out grammatical misconceptions may go some way towards creating an atmosphere in which grammar teaching can be given a fair re-appraisal.

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[5] We can even encourage teachers to rely on their own intuitions; from my experience of using the questionnaire with several groups, most are able, if given the opportunity to exploit their intuitions, to identify acceptable or unacceptable sentences which contradict the 'rules'.

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