What We Actually Need Grammar For: An Introduction To A Functional Perspective On Grammar

Paul Tench

Abstract

This paper is an account of an attempt to raise awareness of the experiential function of grammar amongst first year students at a highly reputed British university, and to promote an approach that highlights meaning in grammar rather than form. An explanation is offered of the Hallidayan meta-functions 'experiential', 'interpersonal' and 'textual' in general, and of the components (processes, participants, circumstances) of the 'experiential' in particular. The study is couched in pedagogical terms as a report of the success of an actual programme. Success is shown by an analysis of student scores in a task of process analysis, which indicates in general terms that the content of the programme appealed to a large group of students with mixed A level backgrounds and mixed academic ambitions.

Keywords: grammar; teaching; functional; linguistics

This is an account of an attempt to impart to first year university students a sense of the primary purposes of grammar. It is an attempt to counter the prevailing sense of formalism in the study of grammar and promote an approach that not only describes the function and purpose of grammar but also the design of it - in other words, to show why grammar is the way it is.

The decision to foreground the functions of grammar was taken on a number of grounds, but especially in the light of point 5 below:

1- It was assumed that students would respond more positively to a focus on meaning rather than on form, because they themselves are more conscious of meaning in their own use of language, especially in its spoken mode.

2- It is a common experience that students appear to be afraid of, or even antagonistic to, grammatical analysis (see, for instance, Hudson 2001) and fail to grasp its relevance. By presenting them with the primary purposes of grammar first, it is hoped that the relevance of grammatical analysis would be understood.

3- The time available on the course concerned was too limited to present even an adequate introduction to a full scale analysis of the grammar of English. (Such a course is available to these students in a subsequent year of their degree programme).

4- The composition of the student audience (see below) has a very mixed background with respect to language awareness, ranging from those who gained *A* in A level *English Language* to those who have not considered the forms and structures of language in any formal way at all. It was thus necessary

a) to provide something new and interesting to the most informed students, and

b) to provide something accessible to the least informed.

5- Experience of teaching grammar to such a mixed group of students in previous years had shown that the least informed students would suffer a distinct disadvantage if the course was unduly technical in its presentation of language and perform less well in assessments than the most informed.

Thus, for these reasons, it was decided to experiment with a presentation of the functions of grammar. The analysis of student scores at the end of this paper clearly suggests that the experiment was worthwhile, with the least informed students achieving good results, on a par with the most informed, and all students having learnt something new and valuable. A brief presentation of the experiment appeared in Tench (2001).

This paper first presents a brief introduction to what is meant by 'experiential'; then a description of the composition of the student audience; this is followed by an outline of the grammar component of the course; and concludes with an analysis of the assessment of a student assignment.

Experiential function

This present approach relies essentially on Halliday's (1985/1994) distinction between the experiential, interpersonal and textual functions of grammar. In a sentence like the following, each of these three functions can be identified:

1- My wife has been sent a bunch of flowers by one of her patients

The *textual* function identifies the **theme** of the clause; the immediate context in which this particular sentence makes sense would be 'talk' about *my wife*. If the immediate 'talk' had been about *flowers / bunches / bunches of flowers*, then the grammar of the sentence would very likely have been re-oriented with a different theme such as:

2- A bunch of flowers has been sent …..

And if the immediate 'talk' had been about *patients / her patients / one of her patients*, then the grammar would very likely have been re-oriented with a different theme again:

3- One of my wife's patients has sent …..

In other words, the ordering of the elements of a message to fit the immediate context

is one function of the grammar, the 'textual' function.

The *interpersonal* function of grammar can also be easily illustrated from 1 above. As it stands, the sentence suggests that the speaker/writer is passing on information that they know, or believe, to be true, or at least are presenting as if true. But the speaker/writer could also seek information, and this difference in their communicative intention, this different 'speech act', is typically realised by a difference in grammar, thus:

4- Has my wife been sent a bunch of flowers

The position of the grammatical subject and the finite verb has changed. Questions of a different kind also require changes in grammar, eg

5- Who has been sent a bunch of flowers

the so-called 'wh-' interrogative, which involves the 'wh-' items: *who, what, which, whose, where, when, why, how.* Thus grammar responds to different statuses that the speaker/writer adopts in relation to the addressee, eg knowing something, or not knowing and therefore asking someone who is deemed to know; or having the authority to tell someone what to do. These changes in grammar reflect the 'interpersonal function'. (It should be noted, that Halliday extends the notion of the interpersonal function to modality, 'the speaker's judgement of the probabilities, or the obligations involved' (Halliday, 1984: 75) in what is being said.)

Whereas the textual function orientates the message to its local context, and the interpersonal function relays the speaker's/writer's status vis a vis the addressee (and their choice of modality) the *experiential* function expresses what is actually going on. In the sentence under consideration, the grammar tells us who sent what to whom. Although *my wife* is the grammatical subject in 1, it was not she who sent the flowers; she was the beneficiary, *one of her patients* was the actor, ie the one who did the sending, and a *bunch of flowers* was the goal of the action, ie what *one of her patients* sent. All this information could have been expressed in a different way, retaining the identical who-did-what scenario:

6- One of my wife's patients sent her a bunch of flowers

In this case, the experiential roles of each participant are maintained and are presented in what may be considered a more logical order: an actor, initiating a process of sending, a beneficiary, and a goal. 1 and 6 'say' the same thing: the textual function of the sentences is different, but the experiential function (as well as the interpersonal function) is the same. (The experiential combines with the *logical* function of grammar, that is the relationship between clauses to form sentences and text, to constitute the *ideational* 'metafunction'; but it is the experiential function that is in focus in this paper.)

It should be noted that although the textual, interpersonal and experiential functions all operate independently, they do so simultaneously. A speaker/writer adjusts the grammar of a message to reflect at the same time (a) their perception of a happening

or a state of affairs (*experiential*), (b) their perception of the immediate context (*textual*) and (c) their presentation of their communicative intent and choice of modality (*interpersonal*). This is a view of grammar 'at work', ie that is functional, rather than a view of grammar as form. It is a view of grammar in talk, in action, in progress – grammar being used – and, above all, a view of grammar as meaning. It helps to explain the design of grammar, why grammar is the way it is; it is an approach that is explanatory, and not primarily formal, nor prescriptive – although there must be a place for the latter in teaching a language.

Pedagogical focus on meaning

My present interest is to show why I believe a functional view of language to be valuable in an introductory course in linguistics for first year students at university. The course in question is a first year course at Cardiff University entitled *Language in Communication* which attracts about 175 students each year. Of them, about 50 will go on to take a BA degree course with a clear language orientation with courses in phonology, syntax, lexis, discourse, sociolinguistics and a variety of applications of linguistics; about 60 will take a BA degree course in *Communication* with a focus on non-linguistic communication as well as a variety of language-based communication topics, like gender, persuasion, the media, etc; and the remainder (the largest group!) take the course as a 'subsidiary' subject because of present University of Wales policies of offering a 'broadening' programme in the first year. This remainder includes students of modern languages, music, history, English literature etc – the typical range of subjects in the Humanities. About 35 will have taken A level *English Language* or *English Language and Literature*, and another 35 an A level in another language; these will have a good, basic, grasp of formal linguistic terminology, including grammatical terms like *noun, verb, subject, indirect object, passive,* etc, but well over a hundred will have little, or no idea at all.

Language in Communication is a 'double' module, with 20 lectures and 5 seminars (12 groups of 14/15) within the first semester of the year, with 50% coursework (which involves the students in recording their own spontaneous speech, transcribing a portion, analysing conversation management, and a small task of grammatical analysis) and 50% written exam of mainly short-answer questions. The challenge is to devise a programme that will appeal to the majority with little linguistics background and yet provide something new and interesting to those who have a relatively good background. The first two lectures are an introduction to salient characteristics of the phenomenon we call language ('Ten things you ought to know about language'), which are followed by a short series on lexical semantics ('Ten things we all know about words') and the written and spoken forms of words. Then come seven or eight lectures on grammar, which are followed up by an introduction to pragmatics.

The focus throughout is on meaning rather than form. The students are native speakers of English or advanced non-native speakers (IELTS 6.5). There is no traditional parsing of text, nor advice on improving language skills. The basic questions are: what

is language? And what is language for? No distinction is made between standard forms and non-standard; so "*You ain't seen nothing yet!"* is treated as having meaning just as any standard form (although the sociolinguistics of it is dealt with elsewhere in the programme). Words are introduced as (linguistic) signs that represent single categories in the conceptualisation of our experience of life, and a few illustrations are given of how different languages 'slice up' that experience in ways different to those of English.

Then comes grammar (and there is a visible shudder throughout the audience!). But I ask the same two questions: what is grammar? (the shaping, ie morphology, and the sequencing, ie syntax, of words in phrases/groups, clauses and sentences) and what is grammar for? Or, why is there grammar at all in the world? Why does every single language in the world have it? It is interesting to see what answers they themselves give, which reveals their prejudices about correctness, clarity and social acceptability. But they have to concede that *"You ain't seen nothing yet!"* has clear meaning and is socially acceptable in context, George W Bush having just made such a pronouncement upon being declared US president.

My primary objective was to present the experiential function of grammar, and secondarily the textual and interpersonal functions; the interpersonal function at the level of clause types (declarative, interrogatives, imperative, exclamative) provides a means of introducing pragmatics (statements, questions, commands, exclamations, and a host of other speech acts) and thus, eventually, that level of meaning too. (Students who are not familiar or confident with traditional grammatical terminology are recommended to study Crystal (1996) by themselves!)

Processes and participants

My starting point was that just as words have meaning – a notion that the students would not dispute – grammar too has meaning – a notion that is much less familiar; and not just the meaning related to morphology (plurality, tenses, comparison) but an order of meaning related to syntax. Whereas words represent the categorisation of our experiences of life in terms of entities: things, qualities, states, actions, and relationships (like time, manner and place), syntax represents the categorisation of our experience of life in terms of happenings: who does what? and to whom (or what), and why, how, where, when?

Bonfire night (5th November) presents a useful illustration. Pretending to read the instructions on a firework – and then pretending to do it – illustrates the language representing happenings: *Place the firework on a firm surface, light the blue touch paper, and retire*. There are 'processes' (placing, lighting, retiring) involved, 'participants' (who does the placing; what gets placed, etc), and circumstances (in this case, a location). There were three different types of process: *placing* requires an actor (or agent), a goal (or affected), ie the firework, and a circumstance of location – all three 'participants' are obligatory in our (English) notion of what happens in *placing*.

Lighting requires an actor and a goal, but does not require the specification of a circumstance; *retiring* requires an actor but not a goal, and again circumstances are optional. This illustration gives me the opportunity of introducing the term 'transitivity', with the idea of an action 'passing' from one participant 'across' to another – or not, as the case may be. Certain processes are transitive, and others are not; thus the concept of transitivity is related to the way we perceive different kinds of happenings, and thus it constitutes a kind of meaning that can be compared with the kind of meaning associated with words. (Transit vans and transit lounges help to illustrate the concept of 'passing from one thing or place to another'.)

Babies provide another useful illustration, this time of intransitivity – the kind of activity they engage in that does not involve another participant. What do they do? They sleep, wake up, smile, chuckle, shout, cry, lie in their cot, look, stare – all intransitive processes, that are primarily realised as intransitive verbs.

A transitivity of a rather different kind is recognised by identifying a range rather than a goal. A goal is identified by asking the question "What was affected (or impacted on) by *x* (the actor) doing something?" In the illustrative examples above, it was the *bunch of flowers*. But in

7- One of her patients sang her a song

we cannot say that the *song* was 'affected' (or 'impacted on') by the 'actor' doing the singing. Rather, *a song* indicates the form that the 'process' of singing took; thus *a song* in 7 is classified as a 'range' rather than a goal. The range (Halliday 1984:134) expresses either the process itself in general or specific terms as in 7 or the domain over which the process takes place as in 8:

8- One of her patients played her a piece of music

Giving and other similar processes have double transitivity in that a beneficiary is obligatory as well as a goal. Sending is also ditransitive, with a goal and a beneficiary as in 9, or a destination as in 10:

9- One of her patients sent her a card

10- One of her patients sent the card to the hospital

Putting, placing and similar processes must have a goal and a location:

11- She put the bunch of flowers in her new vase

12- She tied the card around the vase

Weather expressions illustrate processes which in English are perceived as not involving any participant; who or what does the *it* refer to in *It's raining / snowing / blowing a gale*? Here is also an opportunity to discuss cultural divergences in perception: this is how we represent *raining* in English, but in a dialect of Chinese, it is represented by the equivalent of 'the sky is dropping water' (Halliday 1985:102).

Passive voice

Once the concept of transitivity is grasped, passive voice can be explained. Although I cannot escape from referring to form, it is the function of the passive in English that I emphasise. Why do we do it? Why do we have the option of expressing an event in quite radically different ways? The two main answers involve the textual function and the choice of not specifying the actor of a transitive process. If someone has been talking about John, it would be natural to say, for example:

13- He's painted the wall

but if the talk has been about *the wall*, the alternative is more natural:

14- The wall's been painted (by John)

in other words, the voice choice reflects the local orientation of the message, at a particular point in the text (Martin et al 1997: 21).

Why should we ever want to avoid specifying the actor of a process? Perhaps the actor is already known or, in a given culture, obvious (eg *I was brought up in Somerset*); or the identity of the actor may be irrelevant or unknown (eg *He was killed in the war*), or possibly deliberately treated as if unknown (eg *Oh dear, the jug's been broken*, when knowing full well who broke it!). An advert for AA Car Data Check was helpful: a man is holding a placard which says:

15- I am angry and upset
I was sold a stolen car
It was impounded
I lost the car

Why the passives? The seller is now irrelevant; the thief who stole the car is unknown; it is obvious therefore now who upset him; and we all know that it is the police who impound stolen cars. Such an illustration also helps to separate the ideas of (grammatical) 'subject' and (semantic) 'actor'.

Reference to unspecified actors gives me the opportunity to reflect on what appears to be an increasing usage of *get* in passives. *Get*-passives appear to be used 'overwhelmingly with the absence of an explicit agent, suggesting that emphasis is on the event/process and the person or thing experiencing the process' (Carter & McCarthy, 1999:54). Whereas Carter & McCarthy (1999) and Crystal (1996:89) draw attention to a predilection for unpleasant events to be reported with *get*-passives, it seems to me that the basic motivation for choosing *get* is to indicate a change of state, an 'inchoative' meaning as noted by Jesperson (1949 ¶ 8.8) and Gronemeyer (1999: 26-29), on the analogy of *to get wet*. After all, *to get interested in somebody, to get engaged* and *to get married* do not have to be understood as unpleasant processes!

Circumstances

Circumstances are my third topic in grammar – and their realisation as adverbs, adverbial phrases, prepositional phrases and subordinate clauses. When we talk about happenings, we often need to refer to their relative timing, location, manner (quality; means etc), causes, conditions, accompaniment (eg *together, with / without me; by myself*), addition (eg *too, also; as well as me; nor do I*), substitution (eg *instead; in place of .....; instead of going home*), exception (eg *otherwise, else; except for .....; bar the kitchen sink*), matter (eg *about food;* advise someone *of their rights*), role (eg *as a friend; for a youngster*) and viewpoint (eg *technically; morally; in my opinion, according to experts*). In certain processes like *putting*, a circumstance is obligatory and thus acts as a participant of the process.

With circumstances, I complete my review of the semantic/experiential components of a clause/sentence. I have so far confined myself to so called 'material' (or 'action') processes because they far outnumber all other kinds of processes and because their particular roles are easier to demonstrate. But life is not all (material) action, and grammar reflects this observation.

Mental and verbal processes

Halliday identifies a number of different non-material processes: mental, relational, behavioural, verbal and existential processes. These are identified not only on the semantic basis of different kinds of processes but also by the distinctive linguistic characteristics of their realisation in grammar. He explains the distinctive grammar of *mental* processes in detail (Halliday 1984:106-12). Mental processes are those of perceiving (or physical sensation, like seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling), liking (or affection, like loving, hating, fearing, wanting, regretting) and knowing (or cognition, like thinking, realising, deciding, remembering, forgetting); they are not actions in the sense that they can be used in response to a question like "What is somebody doing?" Halliday points to the combination of five pieces of linguistic evidence to substantiate his claim that they operate differently from material processes.

1 There is always one participant that is human, ie one that 'senses', although animals and inanimate entities can be treated in a slightly humorous or quaint way as if they can sense, eg *My car doesn't like the rain.* Material processes have no such restriction, eg *The sun shone into his room.*

2 The participant that is 'sensed' (the 'phenomenon') need not be a thing, but may be a fact, eg *I saw him coming; She hates them shouting like that; He knows (that) they are coming.*

3 The progressive form of the verb is not typical, eg *I (can) smell gas,* not **I am smelling gas.*

4 The process is not necessarily unidirectional; *Mary liked the gift* and *the gift pleased Mary* express for all intents and purposes the same process, in which *Mary* is

the 'senser' and *the gift* is the phenomenon 'sensed', but either may be (grammatical) subject of the clause without involving the passive voice.

5 The verbs in mental processes not only cannot answer questions like "What is somebody doing?" or "What have they done?" but they cannot always be substituted by the verb *do*. We cannot say *What John did was know the answer.*

These distinctive grammatical characteristics of mental processes demonstrate how – at least in English – we conceptualise mental processes differently from material processes. In other words, the very language itself reflects this difference in our perception of processes (that is, the different kinds of happening) by its grammatical forms and structures. This difference is alluded to, for example, in a learner dictionary's explanation of the difference between *see* and *look.*

> USAGE 1 Compare **see**, **look at**, and **watch**. To **see** is to experience with the eyes, and it does not depend on what you want to do. In this meaning, you can say *Can you* **see** *anything?* but not *Are you* **seeing** *anything?* When you use your eyes on purpose and with attention you **look at** something: *Stop* **looking at** *me like that!* (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1987:945)

Looking is a material process: the verb *look* readily appears in the progressive form, can be used in response to 'doing' questions (*What are they doing? Just looking at some photos*), can readily be substituted by *do* (*All they did was look at some photos*), and cannot take a 'fact' participant (* *They looked that .....)*. But it may be argued that *looking* and *seeing* both involve the mind and the eyes; however, the difference is alluded to in the above dictionary explanation; *seeing* is 'sensing' rather than 'doing', whereas *looking* is 'doing', not just 'sensing'. And we recognise this difference in standard Britsh/American English, not only lexically, but also grammatically. Just as our (English) conceptualisation of things in terms of countability is reflected in the grammar of nouns, so our (English) conceptualisation of processes is reflected in the grammar of verbs and clauses.

Verbal processes display a mixture of the grammatical characteristics of material and mental processes, as might be expected of processes that involve both the mind and 'doing'. As in material processes, verbs can take the progressive form and be substituted by *do (What he did was say it in Urdu)*; they can take both range and beneficiary as participants (eg *He has been telling them a story*). As in mental processes, the equivalent of phenomenon can be either an entity or a fact (*He told her the truth; He told her (that) it was true).* Halliday (1985: 130) uses the term 'verbiage', but since this has such a negative connotation, I prefer the simple term 'message'. The mix of grammatical characteristics seems to reflect our perception of verbal processes as being a blend of both mental and material processes, and it is quite consistent with our consciousness of what language itself is and does, that verbal processes should be marked in this way.

Halliday identifies another type of process that is intermediate between material and mental, on semantic and historical grounds; these he calls behavioural processes which include looking, listening, counting (towards the 'mental' end) and singing, breathing (towards the 'material' end). However, he concedes that behavioural processes are virtually indistinguishable from intransitive material processes on grammatical grounds, and for that reason, I do not present behavioural processes as a separate category. Such processes are not separately identified, but are 'integrated' with material.

In this respect, Lock (1996) agrees with me, although he does give a brief description of what he calls 'mental-action' processes, like watching and listening. But again, these are not distinguished on grammatical grounds, other than the participant being human. It seems to me to be more consistent to recognise mental processes like seeing and hearing on grammatical grounds, and processes like looking, watching and listening as material processes, also on grammatical grounds. Some verbs do double work however: *think* can either be mental (cognition), or material as in

16 What are you doing?
Just thinking to myself

Taste likewise can be not only mental (perception), but also material as in

17 What are you doing?

I'm just tasting this soup to see if it is all right

By abandoning a category of behavioural processes, the presentation of processes is also simpler as well as being more consistent – and it is easier to maintain the argument that our (English) conceptualisation of process types is reflected in our (English) grammar.

Relational and existential processes

Halliday's presentation of relational processes is extremely complicated (Halliday 1985: 112-28) and it is small wonder that Eggins (1994), Bloor & Bloor (1995), Lock (1996) and Thompson (1996) all present much simpler versions. *Relational* processes are not 'happenings' as such but rather states of affairs, which might however be glossed as 'how things happen to be'. They are about being and having. The key terms are Attributes being related (or carried) by an entity, known as the Carrier. An Attribute may be a quality, an entity, a circumstance, a possession or even a process:

18 a The problem is enormous (quality)
b The problem is the amount of work (entity)
c The problem is in the mind (circumstance)
d The problem is yours (possession)
e The problem is explaining this to the children (process)

The verb *be* is the principal marker of the relation between the Attribute and its Carrier, but other verbs can also have this function with an added dimension to the

relation. One additional dimension is that of sensing:

19 a This book looks interesting
b His voice sounds awful
c This chair feels wobbly
d That milk tastes funny
e His cooking smells good

Another is that of a change of state:

20 a He's getting tired
b He's growing tall
c He's becoming quite handsome
d The argument turned nasty

or indeed no change of state:

21 a She's keeping quiet
b She's staying at home
c She's remaining out of things

Lexical verbs of circumstances also indicate a specific relation between Attribute and Carrier:

22 The Pyrenees stand between France and Spain (location)

23 The M4 goes as far as London (distance)

24 The lecture takes place at 2pm (point of time)

25 It lasts (for) one hour (duration)

Have/have got indicate possession

26 a She has (got) long black hair
b He has (got) no sense of dress
c They have (got) a few days off at Christmas

Similarly, *own, possess* and *belong*

27 They have (got) / own / possess two cars

28 The two cars (= attribute) belong to my neighbours (= carrier)

In relational processes, nothing is happening, and thus it may be argued that they are not true processes. However since we (in English) linguistically relate the Attribute to the Carrier by a verb, it can equally be argued that we (in English) perceive the relation as a process, while recognising that in other languages that is not the case.

Existential processes are similar in that nothing can be said to be happening, but simply existing (being there). The principal distinctive grammatical feature is the unstressed *there* with the verb *be.* The entity that is said to exist is called the Existent and is typically associated with a circumstance:

29 a There's nobody in
b There's a new book on the market
c Once upon a time there was a little girl
d Let there be light

Lexical verbs occasionally indicate an existential process:

30 God exists, or God doesn't exist

31 The powers that be

32 There came a big spider

33 There now follows a party political broadcast

Thus ten different kinds of process are distinguished on linguistic grounds in English; our (English) grammar reflects our (English) perceptions of how things happen in life and how things happen to be. The ten processes can be summarised as follows

Process type	Participants (Circumstances are optional)			
Material				
1 intransitive	Actor	Process		
2 transitive	Actor	Process	Goal/Range	
3 ditransitive	Actor	Process	Goal/Range	Beneficiary/Circumstance
4 ***Atmospheric***	*it*	Process		
Mental				
5 perception	Senser	Process	Phenomenon	
6 affection	Senser	Process	Phenomenon	
7 cognition	Senser	Process	Phenomenon	
8 ***Verbal***	Sayer	Process	Range/Message	(Beneficiary)
9 ***Relational***	Carrier	Process	Attribute	
10 ***Existential***	*there*	Process	Existent	

This chart represents a slightly simplified version of the processes described by Halliday (1985/1994), Eggins (1994), Bloor & Bloor (1995), Lock (1996) and Thompson (1996); similar treatments, with alternative terminology, are found in Jackson (1990) and Dirven & Verspoor (1998).

Multi-process verbs

Next comes a further warning of the polysemy of some verbs in terms of processes. *Seeing*, for instance, is assumed at first to represent a mental process of perception/ sensation:

34 Do you see those three trees on the top of the hill? (not * are you seeing …..)

But there are other kinds of *seeing*, as in the mental process of cognition:

35 I see that they have decided to chop them down
and a material/action process:

36 I am seeing the councillors about it tomorrow
which all display different syntactic characteristics. I produce a sample list of such 'tricky' verbs!

Mismatches

I feel then I have to address the issue of mismatching between process types and linguistic form, such as intransitive processes being realised via transitive forms like *I had a long hot bath,* and transitive processes via intransitive forms like *I washed, shaved and dressed*. The first I explain as a Britsh/American preference for ways of indicating the quality of certain intransitive processes; we would not say anything like **I bathed hotly for long*; the second as an assumption in Britsh/American culture that if the 'goal' of certain transitive processes is covert it indicates that the goal is identical to the actor.

Such explanations lead to a consideration of cross-linguistic mismatches. An identical happening can be realised in different ways in different languages; *washing* is always expressed with a transitive verb in French and German, but not in English – we do not feel the necessity of using reflexive pronouns. Welsh does not have a separate form for indicating an existential process, as English, French (*il y a*) and German (*es gibt*) have. Welsh and Spanish have two verbs for *being* to distinguish locative and non-locative relations. Arabic does not require a verb for *being* for relational 'processes' in the present. Atmospheric processes (*it is raining*) vary quite considerably amongst languages. French and German distinguish movement processes in a way that English does not, with *etre / sein* forms in the perfective tenses. German has a range of 'social' processes which require not a goal, but a beneficiary (ie an indirect object), eg *helfen, dienen, danken, trauen.*

Unfortunately I simply do not have enough lecture time to cover modals, phase, causation, or phrasal verbs with non-literal meaning (eg *step in* = 'intervene'; *give up;* etc) if I wish also to introduce the textual and interpersonal functions as a prelude to an introduction to pragmatics.

Students' task

One task that is set the students is to identify four different kinds of process in a piece of informal conversation which they themselves set up, record and transcribe. They must analyse the whole clause in which each process type occurs, identifying not only the process itself, but also each participant and any circumstance. To aid them, a proforma is presented, and used in class (and as homework) in three different genres: a recording (with a transcript) of a piece of informal conversation, the text of a recipe, and the text of a piece of academic writing. Three different genres are used to underline the notion that processes lie behind the grammar of **all** kinds of language. Written guidelines

are produced on how to go about analysing processes, participants and circumstances in any piece of discourse.

The example of informal conversation was the first extract in Carter & McCarthy (1997), part of which is reproduced below.

S1: so anyway . um . my cousin Mervin . that was in the REME . uh . got me a thirty eight

S2: gun

S1:

> *Wesson . Smith and Wesson . special . and Benny's . no it wasn't it was Rick Holmans's shed . and Benny . Brian Beddingfields . knew his dad had some ammunition . from the war . and he found it and they were thirty eights . so we um . took them over the marshes and shot a couple of rounds off and that was great and then one . one day we were in up Prospect Road . near the scout hut . in a shed . in a . um Rick Holmans's shed . so there was four of us in this . sort of eight by s . six shed (0.5) and we were playing about with the thing . and we messed about with it and did the usu you know and and sort of said oh we'll put a cross in it and make a dum-dum of it . and fired it . in the shed . at . at at the bit of wood (laughter) . and this bullet went round the shed about three times . and we all just froze . (laughter) and this bullet went round and round and round (laughter) was absolutely outrageous . and we had no concept of what we what could have happened*

'Getting' is recognised as the first process, with an actor (*my cousin Mervin that was in the REME*), a beneficiary (*me*) and a goal (*a 38 Smith and Wesson special*); the process is thus also recognised as a ditransitive material process.

The speaker then starts a new clause but abandons it, reconsiders his message and produces his second full clause, which begins unhelpfully with *it*. One is left to assume that *it* refers to a setting which is subsequently identified: thus the process is relational (*be*), *Rick Holman's shed* is the attribute related to the carrier *it*.

The speaker now moves the narrative on, having established its topic and the setting, and does so by referring to a mental process of cognition, 'knowing'. The 'knower', or senser, is *Brian Beddingfields* (or '*Benny*') and the phenomenon that is known is *his dad had some ammunition from the war*.

Next comes another mental process, but this time, of perception, 'finding', with Benny (= *be*) still as the senser and the ammunition (= *it*) as the phenomenon.

And so the procedure continues, identifying processes and participants, and also circumstances which happen not to feature in these first four clauses.

(Circumstances did feature soon afterwards in the clause *we took them over the marshes*, where the prepositional phrase *over the marshes* expresses a location.) What is immediately apparent is that the first four clauses each represent a different kind of process with their distinctive grammar. (The students' task would have been thereby completed if this text had been theirs!)

The main point is that the students were examining grammar not from the standpoint of form – identifying subject, verb, verb form, direct and indirect object, main clause, relative clause, report clause, etc – but from the standpoint of meaning, the representation of experience. In our experience of life, we know that there is a kind of activity that is captured in the lexical verb *get* (in the sense of 'obtain'/'fetch') which, we know, involves an actor, a beneficiary and a goal; grammar, in its experiential function, provides the mechanism for drawing these participants together around the process. Similarly we know that in our experience of life, it is important to be able to identify things; we use grammar for that precise purpose, relating an attribute to a carrier via a verb like *be*. Likewise the two kinds of mental process illustrated above; *know* and *find* exhibit the typical grammatical characteristics that classify verbs expressing mental processes as detailed above: a senser instead of an actor, a phenomenon that is sensed – in one case a fact, in the other, a thing – the inappropriateness of replacing the verbs with *do*, and the unlikeliness of progressive forms of the verb (not **Benny was knowing his dad ...., *he was finding it;* NB *he was finding it difficult* represents a different meaning of *find.*)

Students' response

How well did the 175 first year students respond to this approach? Feedback from seminars was pretty uniform: the initial response was one of the kind of bafflement that comes when one is required to abandon a familiar notion in order to consider an alternative, but once they saw syntax as a representation of their own experience of happenings – and not as a minefield of often deceptive forms and structures – they took to the analysis with intelligence and (to a certain degree) enthusiasm. This approach to grammar appeared to be new to them all.

How well did they perform their task? They had to identify four different kinds of process in the conversation they themselves recorded and transcribed; this meant applying a new approach to syntax with entirely original data. A proforma was provided:

process:	*get* (material ditransitive)
actor:	*my cousin Mervin that was in the REME*
beneficiary: *me*	
goal:	*a 38 Smith and Wesson special*
circumstance:	none

etc.

Did the students with A level English language or other modern language have an advantage? The results are interesting. Each script was marked (and in many cases

double-marked) out of 25; 6 points were allocated to each process analysis, and an extra point added if the student had set out the participants and circumstances clearly, according to the proforma. 18 students scored a maximum of 25; 8 of them had A level English, 6 an A level in a modern language, 4 had no language A level. 18 students scored 12 or less, ie got a maximum of two of four process analyses right; 4 of these students had A level English, another 4 an A level in a modern language, and 10 no such A level. Thus a relevant A level background was no guarantee of success, and the lack of such a background no bar to success. The average scores by A level background and by degree orientation reveal the same conclusion.

A level background				
Degree Orientation	A level English	A level Modern Language	No A level Language Course	Average
Language	19.26	20.66	19.77	19.51
Communication	19.0	18.2	17.93	18.39
Subsidiary	14.66	19.5	16.16	17.61
Average	18.82	19.4	17.13	18.18

Average scores by A level background and degree orientation

The average score from 185 scripts was 18.18 out of 25. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those students who have embarked on a degree programme with a clear language orientation scored 1.33 points higher on average; however, those with no language orientation in their degree programme scored only a little less, just 0.57 less on average. Interest and motivation are very likely to account for such differences. The group of students who scored best were those with a modern language A level background who had embarked on a language-oriented degree course, but those with no A level language course outperformed those with A level English amongst the groups of students on a language-oriented degree programme. Indeed, the poorest performers were those with A level English who had not chosen a language-oriented degree programme, scoring a rather low average of 14.66.

I believe that this shows that in general terms, the content of the grammar section of the *Language in Communication* course succeeded in satisfying the challenge to devise a programme of studies in grammar that would not unduly favour students with a language A level background nor unduly disadvantage those with no such background, and at the same time present something novel that related to their own experience. The range of total average scores by A level background and by degree orientation is surprisingly, but reassuringly, small.

References

Bloor, T & Bloor, M (1995) *The Functional Analysis of English* London: Arnold
Crystal, D (1996) *Rediscover Grammar* rev ed Harlow: Longman
Carter, R & McCarthy, M (1997) *Exploring Spoken English.* Cambridge: CUP
Carter, R & McCarthy, M (1999) 'The English *get*-passive in spoken discourse: description and implications for an interpersonal grammar', *English Language and Linguistics 3/1*:41-58
Dirven, R & Verspoor, M (eds) (1998) *Cognitive Exploration of Language and Linguistics.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins
Eggins, S (1994) *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* London: Pinter
Gronemeyer, C (1999) 'On deriving complex polysemy: the grammaticalization of *get*', *English Language & Linguistics 3/1*:1-39
Halliday, M A K (1985/1994) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* London: Arnold
Hudson, R (2001) 'Grammar teaching: why, when, how and what?', Subject Centre Grammar Supplement, *Liaison 3*. Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies Subject Centre
Jackson, H (1990) *Grammar and Meaning* London: Longman
Jespersen, O (1909-49). *A modern English grammar on historical principles.* Heidelberg/Copenhagen: Carl Winters Universitۥtsbuchhandlung/EnjarMunksgaard. Reprinted London:1961
Leech, G & Svartvik, J (1994) *A Communicative Grammar or English* 2nd ed Harlow: Longman
Lock G (1996) *Functional English Grammar* Cambridge: CUP
Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1987) London: Longman
Martin, J R, Matthienssen, C M I M & Painter, C (1996) *Working with Functional Grammar* London: Arnold
Tench P (2001) 'What Grammar is actually for', Subject Centre Grammar Supplement, *Liaison 3*. Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies Subject Centre
Thompson, G (1996) *Introducing Functional Grammar* London: Arnold

Appendix

Sample anwers to the **student task** (with permission)

1. Sarah Wearne (with A level English Language; enrolled for BA English Language Studies)
2. Gareth Clee (with A levels in German and Welsh; enrolled for BA Welsh & Language Studies)
3. Rosalind Sacre (mature student; enrolled for BA Language & Communication)
4. Jennifer Hawkins (no A level in English or modern language; enrolled for BA Education)