

Never judge a (text)book by its cover: How localized is Murphy et al.'s *Essential Grammar in Use – French Edition*?

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Following up on the growing interest for localized teaching materials in ELT (see for example, Mishan & Chambers, 2010), this paper looks at the treatment of the present continuous and the present perfect simple in the French edition of Murphy's best-selling *Essential Grammar in Use* (2007) to determine the added value of this localized edition. The paper contends that the French edition largely retains the 'one-size-fits-all' approach of its English-only counterpart as well as its focus on formS¹ agenda. It is also suggested that the contrastive approach adopted by Murphy et al. (2009) may in the end prove detrimental to French learners, especially due to simplified 'rules of thumb', lack of consideration for actual usage and excessive emphasis on morphosyntax.

Introduction

To the outsider, language teaching materials might seem to offer a variety of approaches and teaching solutions. Witness the vast number of textbooks in all sizes and colours, the glossy covers and programmatic blurbs. Such surface diversity unfortunately belies a deeper homogeneity both in terms of content and organization. ELT publishing is indeed highly risk-averse; it is characterized by a tendency to replicate commercially successful course books (see e.g. Tomlinson, 2003). The main reason for such self-replicating approaches lies in what applied linguists have dubbed the 'washback effect' (see for instance Alderson & Wall, 1993). Macro-level variables such as high-stakes testing or job market requirements have indeed been shown to constrain micro-level variables such as classroom practices and textbooks.

The existence of one of Cambridge University Press' best-selling titles for the French-speaking market, Murphy's *Essential Grammar in Use* (2007), should thus be considered, at least potentially, as a step in the right direction.² Localized materials, which have become a central axis of research in materials design (see for example, Mishan & Chambers, 2010), are indeed more likely to be context-sensitive, learner-oriented and innovative (Farr et al., 2010). However, this paper contends that the descriptor 'French edition' in Murphy et al.'s (2009) textbook is deceptive. The localized edition only provides limited contrastive information and does so in ways that are likely to confuse, rather than help, French-speaking learners. More fundamentally, the French edition retains the same problematic 'form-as-facts'

¹ The term 'focus on formS' is intended to indicate a focus on individual forms in traditional grammar-focused lessons, to differentiate this from occasional focus on form during meaning-focused activities ('focus on form'). Both terms were coined by Long (1991).

² Note that Murphy's *Essential Grammar in Use* has also been localized for the Spanish, Italian and German markets. In their foreword (2009, p.ix), the authors of the French edition suggest that the Spanish and Italian localized editions were instrumental to their own project, which leads me to suspect that the observations made in the present paper have wider implications.

approach of the English-only volume. In short, this paper argues that the French edition offers little added value. The treatment of the present continuous and of the present perfect simple is a case in point.

Homogeneity in diversity

Since the beginning, the 'French edition' of Murphy's *Essential Grammar in Use* has consistently looked almost identical to the international edition: with a similar cover design, size, colours, fonts, illustrations and length. All of these similarities have created a sense of editorial consistency. In marketing terms, the French edition has clearly capitalized on the success of the *in Use* brand.

Interestingly, a diachronic look at the various editions of *Essential Grammar in Use* shows that changes have mostly remained at the surface level, for instance with the addition of colour to the illustrations. Note, too, that the latest French edition has had the privilege of inaugurating the new larger format for the whole series and that the upcoming international edition will be hallmarked, as announced in CUP's latest catalogue, by a 'fresh new cover'. From a sales perspective, it makes sense to recycle 'tried and tested' course books so as not to compromise years of branding efforts with radical changes.

The similarities between the French and international editions extend far beyond such cosmetic considerations though. The tables of contents indeed look conspicuously similar both in terms of selection, sequencing and space devoted to individual items and this is true, once again, whether you look at *Essential Grammar in Use* and its localized spin-off synchronically or diachronically. The progression is largely, if not solely, determined by the morphological complexity of individual forms in English. The fact that the present continuous is dealt with before the present simple might seem to contradict my argument, but this is easily explainable. Indeed, ELT publishing tends to consider the present continuous as 'the unmarked form' even though actual corpus evidence suggests otherwise (Biber & Reppen, 2002, pp.203-5).

The reviewed texts thus reflect, and possibly also help perpetuate, a focus on formS ethos in ELT in which language is viewed as a repertoire of 'words and rules' acquired incrementally to form a system of 'accumulated entities' (Rutherford, 1987). More worryingly perhaps, the situation anno 2012 seems to be identical to that which researchers reported on in the 1990s. Basturkman (1999), for instance, looked at blurbs in bestselling EFL course books in New Zealand. Her content analysis uncovered the beliefs about language and language learning that informed EFL practice in New Zealand. She concluded that '75% of the blurbs claimed the work to be based solidly in grammar' (Basturkman 1999, p.19). The descriptors used in those blurbs further revealed that 'content referring to the language system had a high frequency of occurrence [...] especially words denoting grammar' (ibid., p.27). In other words, we have not come a long way from Thomson & Martinet's structuralist approach (1960).

There are many reasons for the perpetuation of such a focus on formS ethos in ELT. From a teacher's perspective, it is convenient, because '[...] language can be treated as a set of fixed forms and routines which can be isolated, in grammatical and functional terms, and taught separately' (Tarone & Yule, 1989, p.11). From a publisher's perspective, it would seem unwise to change a book that sells so well and risk alienating customers because in the end, ELT publishing is about profit-making first and only secondly about actual learning. Moreover, it is generally believed that if textbooks sell well, it means they must somehow meet customer needs although it is more likely the case, Tomlinson (2001, p.7) remarks, that the textbooks themselves have served as models for teachers' and learners' expectations.

From an SLA researcher's perspective, however, there is much to be said against such surface-level treatment of linguistic phenomena. There is a robust body of corpus evidence that points to the necessity for grammar pedagogy to go beyond word-level, morphosyntactic considerations. English is indeed largely formulaic i.e. it consists of a vast number of multi-word units (see for example, Sinclair, 1991). SLA researchers now agree that second language acquisition is facilitated by the acquisition of a repertoire of such multi-word units and prefabricated chunks (see for example, Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). Murphy does include some patterns (see for example, Unit 34 - Would you like ... ? / I'd like ...), but these attempts provide a very limited number of highly frequent functional phrases that are at best typical of Communicative Language Teaching in the 1980s. However convenient from a language teaching perspective, taking the word as the basic unit of analysis may lead to confusion in the learner's mind as to the nature of language learning.

There is an additional, perhaps more problematic, caveat to Murphy's approach. ELT typologies for grammar teaching have indeed been shown to rely more on intuition and tradition than on actual objective, research-based criteria (Byrd, 1995). For instance, Gabrielatos (2003, 2006) has pointed to the inconsistencies of traditional approaches to English conditionals. Römer (2005) has done the same for the present continuous. Key aspects like frequency of occurrence (see for example, Biber & Reppen, 2002) and register (see for example, Conrad, 2000) are not taken into account, which once again raises the question of the accuracy of the grammatical descriptions that are provided.

Leaving aside content requirements for grammar teaching, detailed treatments of instructional options by Long & Robinson (1996) and Doughty & Williams (1998), among others, have demonstrated the value of occasional attention to form within communicative language teaching, the so-called focus on form approach.

Finally, the focus on 'verbal fluency' also obscures the fact that conceptual errors are the most prevalent and the most disruptive in L2 acquisition (Danesi, 2008). This has crucial implications for FL teaching. Learners may make different mistakes depending on their linguistic background. The idea is that individual languages constrain human thought processes in ways that are language specific (Pütz & Verspoor, 2000;

Niemeier & Dirven, 2000). Bowerman and Choi's cross-linguistic discussion of prepositions (2001: 484-7), for instance, has demonstrated that children resort to language-specific semantic structure to denote space. In other words, when using teaching materials that are designed for a worldwide audience as most people do, you may be missing on important contrastive conceptual and formal aspects while at the same time wasting valuable class time on things that are 'transparent' for learners, not to mention the deficit in affective engagement.

What is the added value of the French edition?

As we argued above, the organization and contents of the French edition parallel that of the international edition. In this sense, the former bears more likeness to a translation *in* French than to an edition *for* French-speaking learners. This is not to say that the French edition offers no contrastive information. Unfortunately, it does so in ways that may prove detrimental to French-speaking learners. For the most part and as evidenced by the section on the present perfect simple, the problems are a direct consequence of the focus on formS approach. On the other hand, the treatment of the present continuous illustrates that the overreliance on intuition rather than referral to actual usage is also to blame.

The present perfect simple

The form of the present perfect simple should not be problematic for French-speaking learners as French too has a morphologically similar tense, the 'passé composé', which is formed using either the auxiliary *être* or *avoir* with a past participle. The present perfect simple is all the more transparent, at least morphologically, since students need not choose one of two possible auxiliaries as is the case in French. The French edition includes a note pointing out that *have* is the only option in English (p32C), although from my experience students rarely use *be* to form the present perfect simple anyway. My intuitions were confirmed by a search of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) which revealed that out of circa 1500 uses of the present perfect simple, only a small percentage contain the auxiliary *be*.

The problem lies in the often radically different temporal arrangements that these morphologically similar tenses construe, at least in their most prototypical use. In French, the 'passé composé' prototypically construes an action that is located in a past-time sphere (as in 1) and only marginally – that is less prototypically – in a pre-present sphere (as in 2). In its most prototypical use, then, the 'passé composé' resembles the simple past. In English, the present perfect simple prototypically locates an action in the pre-present sphere only (as in 3).

1 J'ai mangé une pomme ce matin (I ate an apple this morning – past-time sphere)

2 J'ai mis mon chapeau; il est donc sur ma tête (I have put on my hat; that's why it is on my head – pre-present sphere)

3 I have seen this movie (pre-present sphere)

The French edition still tells students that the present perfect simple 'often corresponds to the 'passé composé' in French' (p32C, my translation). It remains to be seen whether we are talking about the resultative 'passé composé' or the other one. 'Often' is a rather vague indication of frequency; such impressionistic claims are best avoided unless clear percentages based on solid corpus evidence are also provided as in Biber et al.'s *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (1999). Such a focus on formS approach is indeed likely to mislead French-speaking learners into believing that there is a one-to-one correlation between 'passé composé' and present perfect simple (Romero-Muñoz, 2011: 32-3), which is far from being systematically the case as in 4 and 5 where French uses the 'présent simple'.

4 How long has she been in Ireland? (Depuis combien de temps est-elle en Irlande?)

5 I have just eaten (Je viens de manger)

It seems French-speaking learners need to be made aware that the present perfect establishes a connection between past time and speech time. Any reference to the morphological likeness between the present perfect simple and the 'passé composé' is bound to create confusion and should thus be avoided. Likewise, any reference to French tenses when teaching English tenses should be avoided for the same reason unless the tenses display almost identical usage patterns such as the past perfect and the 'plus-que-parfait'. In this sense, Murphy et al. (2009) deserve some credit for using English names for English tenses in the French edition.

The present continuous

The treatment of the present continuous presents us with a different, but equally problematic, pedagogical choice. As we pointed out above, both editions of *Essential Grammar in Use* are built around the same logic that views language acquisition as a cumulative sum of discrete items. In keeping with this atomistic conception of language, the authors consistently disregard actual usage and seek to formulate *a priori* rules that force language into artificial categories. The present continuous, for instance, is said to refer to actions or situations that are ongoing (p8B). This characterization, which the book shares with most of the ELT world, proves problematic for even common usage events as in (6) and (7):

6 ?The phone rings every time I'm here.

7 ?I'm lovin it

As the question marks indicate, these sentences may prove hard to fit within the idea of *ongoingness*. Students will typically say that in (6) the action of 'ringing' lasts for some time even though the phone is not ringing now and we should be using the progressive, or that a stative verb cannot be put in the continuous as in (7). Once again it seems that the very concept of *ongoingness* is rather impressionistic in that it may mean different things to different people.

When forcing usage data to conform to artificial categories such as *ongoingness*, and by artificial I mean that have not been linked to the way our brain conceptualizes reality, authors risk overlooking underlying conceptual principles. After all, we do not think in terms of verbs and nouns. Rather, grammar encodes our subjective perspective in the form of ‘viewing arrangements’ (Langacker, 2001:16).³ Meaning therefore is not inherent in a situation nor do the structures that are used to express something have meaning as such. Students do not need a simplified ‘rule of thumb’ that works for the majority of cases; their attention needs to be drawn to conceptual mechanisms underlying grammatical structures. Clearly, the concept of *ongoingness* is not the most adequate.

While the idea of telling students that no one-to-one equivalent exists in French is commendable (p8B), one might wonder at the potentially undesirable consequences of the following comment: ‘You normally use the ‘présent’ (*être en train de + infinitif*) to describe an action that is ongoing or a habit’ (8, my translation). If the sentence refers to the ‘présent simple’ in French, then it is badly phrased. Is the author talking about the ‘présent simple’ in general or the grammaticalized verb phrase ‘être en train de’ in the ‘présent simple’ in particular? By contrast, if the author refers to the ‘present continuous’ in English, then it is simply wrong, because habits are prototypically expressed using unmarked/simple aspect in English as in the following sentences:

6 I wake up at six every day

7 I walked/would walk/used to walk to school when I was a child

Where do we go from here?

It should be clear by now that I consider that the French edition of *Essential Grammar in Use* offers little in terms of added value. This ‘localized’ edition has indeed been shown to recycle the international one both in terms of contents and presentation without any serious cross-linguistic/contrastive considerations. The problem may not lie so much in the fact that most authors are adopting the same taxonomies or in the use of misleading descriptors such as ‘new’ and ‘French edition’ as it does in the realization that course books are being replicated almost unchanged despite (a) the emergence of a consensus around the *sine qua non*s of effective materials designs (Tomlinson, 1998), (b) the documented need to match textbooks with local teaching contexts (see, for example, Farr et al., 2010) and, more worryingly, (c) the recommendations from pedagogical grammar research (see, for example, Long & Robinson, 1998; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Larsen-Freeman, 2003) to shift the focus from ‘a form-as-facts to a form-as-meaning approach’ (Romero-Muñoz, 2010, p.18; author’s emphasis). The focus on formS approach indeed results in the problematic dissociation between form and meaning, and I

³ Note that the term should be taken figuratively, with ‘viewing’ referring to all possible ways of conceptualizing a situation, not just through visual perception.

agree with Ellis when he says that 'any reference grammar that fails to describe form-meaning connections of the target language must necessarily be inadequate' (2006, p.87).

However much as SLA researchers might disapprove of Murphy's atomistic approach to grammar, CUP has sold an estimated 30 million copies so far and other titles that put more emphasis on meaning such as Swan & Walter's *The Good Grammar Book* (2001) have not been so successful. I see two related reasons for this. If you look at 'theories-in-use', you realize that teachers are predominantly proponents of the 'words and rules' approach. Teachers might espouse more communicative or meaning-focused approaches, but for them language teaching largely consists of teaching grammatical structures supplemented by vocabulary learning.⁴ Teachers have also been shown to value practical solutions (Basturkman, 1999). Not only are teachers convinced that the 'accumulated entities' model works, but that the model also lends itself to teaching. By contrast, a usage-based, corpus-driven grammar of English that reflects language in all its complexity is bound to look a lot 'messier'.

In short, SLA researchers should not advocate a *tabula rasa* approach; they should distance themselves from the prevailing ethos in SLA research, which consists in 'a problematic progressivism, whereby whatever is happening now is presumed to be superior to what happened before' (Byram, 2004, p.278). Rather, any viable innovation in grammar teaching needs to build on what is already available, be it only to avoid putting actual practitioners off. In a first stage, existing typologies could be reorganized so as to reflect a concept-based progression rather than a form-based one only. Perhaps the addition of a secondary table of contents centered on concepts rather than forms as in Leech & Svartvik's *Communicative Grammar of English* (1996) would be a good start. There is nothing wrong with providing clear indications about form, for instance in charts and grammar boxes, but teachers should always try to weave their grammatical agenda into their lessons rather than the other way around. In other words, meaning should always come first. Grammar is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Exercises should be revised too so as to ensure they focus on the prototypical; the idea is to draw attention to regularities first and only subsequently to idiosyncrasies. This is all the more true since irregularities are largely a by-product of impressionistic rules of thumb (see the discussion of *ongoingness* above). To do this, a localized grammar textbook will need to be based on carefully selected usage events that combine data from native as well as learner corpora across a wide range of registers.

What of rules then? However questionable traditional rules may be, they still serve some descriptive and analytical purpose. Unfortunately, such heuristic approaches are at odds with what we know about our neurocognitive system and its network-like configuration (Lamb, 2001, pp.188-9). Such networks do not contain rules in the

⁴ 'Theories-in-use' represent what teachers would actually do in certain situations. This concept, which Basturkman borrows from Argyris and Schön (1974:6-7), is usually contrasted with the teachers' 'espoused theory of action,' which is what teachers claim they would do in such a situation.

canonical sense; they are composed of schemata at different degrees of abstraction that coexist with concrete instances (Bybee, 1985; Langacker, 1987; Dąbrowska, 2004). An abstract schema representing the S-V-O construction may coexist with chunks like 'Michael wants milk' even though the latter is clearly a concrete realization of the former. 'The grammar of a language, then, consists not of a single delimited system, but rather,' Hopper (1998) informs us, 'of an open-ended collection of forms that are constantly being restructured and resemanticized during actual use' (p.160). Any cognitively sound pedagogical grammar should therefore allow 'particular statements (specific forms) [to] coexist with general statements (rules accounting for those forms) [...] [and incorporate] a huge inventory of specific forms learned as units (conventional forms). Out of this sea of particularity speakers extract whatever generalizations they can' (Langacker, 1987, p.46). Grammar is thus best taught inductively in a prototype-to-extensions fashion using corpus-informed usage data to identify the necessary descriptive rules and the even more necessary repertoire of chunks (Achard, 2004).

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