Formal Grammar? They Already Know it, so Just Show it

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Abstract

This paper discusses Wittgenstein's approach to teaching grammar to children who spoke provincial German dialect that mixed up dative and accusative cases while these are differentiated in High German. Wittgenstein showed his pupils this difference by presenting various sentences solely in the dialect form without making any reference to High German or suggesting that the dialect is an inferior form of German. He starts with the provincial form that children know and instead of moving on to teach High German, he stays where children are by demonstrating differences in specific usage in the children's own form of the language. The implications of this approach for cognitive development of children and for teacher preparation is brought out.

What can one of the greatest philosophers who ever lived tell schoolteachers? Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) is famous for giving western philosophy not one but two directions, with two mighty works, and for being noted in philosophical and other academic cultures all around the world. He is also known for being an enigmatic and often difficult, if charismatic, person. As he is a very modern though not contemporary figure, a vast amount of biographical and autobiographical material on and by him is widely available. Born into the enormously wealthy family of an Austrian industrialist, he qualified as an engineer and then went on to study logic and philosophy. In the First World War, he used neither his family's position nor a double hernia to obtain a non-combat posting. Instead, he served on Germany's Eastern Front, gaining admiration for his calmness under Russian and later, British fire. He was promoted to the rank of lieutenant (Sphinx, 2014). Sometimes in 1915, Wittgenstein had begun corresponding with Bertrand Russell and this correspondence continued when Wittgenstein was taken prisoner on the Southern—the Italian—Front late in the war, Wittgenstein continued his correspondence with Bertrand Russell in captivity, first from Como and then from Monte Cassino, the former monastery. At that time, he was working on what became his first great work, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.

After the war, Wittgenstein qualified as a schoolteacher, and from 1920 to 1926 he taught in three village schools in the province of Lower Austria south-west of the capital, Vienna. At the time, the Austrian education system was facing substantial calls for reform towards less formal and rigid methods, and towards what we might today call integrated content rather than the subject-based disciplines and intensive rote-learning of the kind which respectively formed the syllabus and the approach. The main figures pressing for reform were Otto Glöckel, a school reformer, and Karl Bühler, a philosopher and psychologist (Bartley, 1986, pp. 17-18). Many of the reformers were socialists or social democrats. They saw one of the main tasks of education as enabling students to be citizens of a democracy, who could weigh issues actively and decide for themselves instead of passively accepting state decrees and religious authority; some of the reforms seem to have worked well in the classroom (Bartley, 1986, p. 80).

Wittgenstein was not an uncritical supporter of the reforms and lampooned the more absurd statements made by the proponents of reform, but he got to know Glöckel well and was on good terms with him (Bartley, 1986, p. 80). Wittgenstein's time as a school teacher was a matter of mixed fortunes, but in the village of Puchberg and Schneeberg, where he taught from 1922 to 1924, many of his pupils and their parents remember him fondly, even decades later (Bartley, 1986, pp. 88-93). In the other two villages, Trattenbach and Otterthal, Wittgenstein's experience was more difficult. Particularly in Otterthal, where the farmers were relatively poor and deeply Catholic, Wittgenstein, known to be of a wealthy family and not Catholic (he had been baptized in a Catholic church, possibly because his mother was a Catholic, but seems never to have practised that faith), encountered enough suspicion for an episode of classroom punishment. The punishment, of a form normal for the time and apparently not very severe, was blown up into a serious allegation and even a criminal investigation into his state of mind. Moreover, the villagers needed their

children to work on the farms after school, and they bitterly resented the after-school time the children willingly spent with their teacher on things such as science experiments and nature observations (Bartley, 1986, pp. 88-93, 107-111). Wittgenstein never returned to school teaching.

Possible similarities can be seen between the respective approaches advocated by Glöckel and Bühler and those adopted by Wittgenstein in his classrooms; some of these have been noted by Bartley (Bartley, 1986, pp. 17-18, 112-114). However, one of the most striking features of Wittgenstein's methods was the way he taught formal grammar. Teaching formal grammar, as we know only too well today, is a continuing and apparently insoluble problem irrespective of the language we teach. It can be a frustrating chore for teachers, and an often incomprehensible and seemingly needless burden for pupils, as well as a constant source of worry about marks and grades. When treated as part of the 3Rs and nothing else, formal grammar can be a hindrance to the development of children's cognitive capacities. The development of cognitive capacities is currently receiving attention considering substantial evidence which confirms the poor, and possibly very poor, quality of learning—or in the current jargon, learning outcomes—in early-years education across much of India (ASER, 2019, p. 2). The draft National Education Policy 2019 is also clear about this (as cited in ASER, 2019, p. 2, fn. 4).

Wittgenstein's approach to teaching grammar, going by the examples Bartley quotes, is certainly striking. His pupils and their parents spoke a provincial German dialect, which is the local form of the language in their part of Austria. They often, as Bartley says, mixed up the dative

and accusative cases, which are differentiated in formal German or, as it is more commonly known, High German or Hochdeutsch. Wittgenstein showed his pupils this difference by presenting various sentences solely in the dialect form, as follows. I have used Bartley's transliteration of the dialect (Bartley, 1986, p. 97):

1. The word "ihm" is in the dative case, and means "to him". Wittgenstein presented this as:
    "I hob eamg'sogt."
    In High German, this would be:
    "Ich habeihmgesagt."
    or in English "I said to him."
2. The word "ihn", meaning "him", is in the accusative case, and connotes a direct object; in this dialect, it is expressed as "n" or "m". Wittgenstein presented this as:
    "I hob m g'sehn."
    In High German, this would be:
    "Ich habeihngesehen."
    or in English "I saw him."
3. The word "ihnen" is in the dative plural case and means "to them". Wittgenstein presented this as:
    "I hob's eanag'sogt."
    In High German this would be:
    "Ich habe es ihnengesagt."
    or in English "I said it to them."

The point here, as Bartley notes, is that Wittgenstein uses the dialect itself to convey a significant point in German grammar. He makes no reference to High German, and he certainly seems to make no attempt to suggest that the dialect is an inferior form of German (Bartley, 1986, p. 97).

This is potentially far-reaching. Wittgenstein starts, so to speak, where the children are, using only the form of the language they themselves speak. That

by itself may be relatively commonplace in teaching and learning theory and in a lot of classroom practice today, especially in the Global North and in elite junior schools in the Global South. However, instead of moving on to teach High German, Wittgenstein stays where the children are, in the dialect form, and he conveys the substantive grammatical point by demonstrating differences in specific usage in the children's own form of the language.

This demonstrative method may or may not be what language teachers (and not only language teachers), today call an inductive approach, or possibly a constructivist one (Prince & Felder, 2006). The overall evidence for the effectiveness of this kind of approach shows that it is better than the deductive approaches which characterize teaching in several disciplines (Prince & Felder, 2006), though we must note that Prince and Felder rightly caution against dogmatism about teaching methods.

My point here, however, is that Wittgenstein's approach—as exemplified by Bartley's selection—requires and rewards careful planning by the teacher, and changes for the better the relationship between the teacher or teachers, and the learners. Particularly in severely stratified societies, taking the pupils' own form of their first language seriously as a medium for the substantive learning of formal grammar reduces the pupils and the teachers' sense of social distance or stratification between one another. It also empowers the pupils by alerting them to the knowledge they already possess, in what might be called tacit form, of features of formal grammar. Secondly, it could form part of a teaching approach which involves the development of the pupils' cognitive capacities as a

necessary element. Thirdly, it changes the status of formal and informal or dialect versions of the language; those cease to be low and high forms and become instead different registers for use in different contexts and for different purposes.

For the teacher, this kind of approach clearly not only requires meticulous planning and preparation, but it also requires teachers to have extensive knowledge, even command, of the grammar of the language or languages they teach. That raises broader questions about teacher training and about the wider social contexts in which formal registers are used. Those are questions which lie outside the scope of this paper, though as an academic, a senior journalist, and then again an academic, I have always appreciated the value of the contribution my cognitive capacities (for which I make no special claims) made to the way I learnt the formal grammar which I was taught in the early years of my secondary schooling—in English as well as in Latin and French. The ASER report I have cited earlier recognizes the significance of early-years cognitive capacity, and one implication of that is that schools themselves can or should take on a more explicit role in developing pupils' cognitive capacities.

The kind of approach exemplified by Wittgenstein—and very probably already used in very many teacher-training systems, including those in India—has no doubt been adopted in many school systems around the world. However, a few examples may help us think about how we could develop some of our own materials to help develop our pupils' cognitive capacities and thereby engage more rewardingly with their school subjects.

There is no doubt that we still need formal grammar; we need to be able to use formal registers in a range of contexts, and we, therefore, need a reasonable command of the appropriate grammatical forms. This has undoubtedly been noted by millions or possibly even hundreds of millions of teachers around the world. However, it is also the case that teachers can now draw upon any number of existing resources to teach formal grammar in relatively informal ways which engage the pupils in games, songs, and other activities. For example, the Pinterest website provides several apparently freely accessible materials which can be used as games. One such game has a card with two columns, one showing informal locutions and the other the corresponding formal ones (Tulsian, n.d.). This could easily be adapted into a game, for example, one in which children have a little prior exposure to both forms of expression and then work in pairs. One child utters one set of, say, the informal locutions, one by one, and the other responds to each locution with its formal counterpart, or the other way around. This can also be done in small groups, or with the class divided into teams. As a reinforcement game or exercise, the children could even find or devise their own examples of formal or colloquial locutions for the game, or the game could involve composing, say the formal locutions in response to each informal one, and so on. Variations could involve appropriate emphases on reading, writing, listening, and speaking respectively.

Any number of these kinds of activities can be viewed on the internet, and many of them are now available in mobile-friendly forms, among others. Teachers in schools without access to the internet, or where resources are limited, might, therefore, be able to adapt ideas for classroom use without violating copyright. My point here is that of course, it is still necessary for us to teach formal grammar, but certain ways in which that can be done amount both to democratization and to empowerment—and that the children learn grammar through use. Once again, I am aware of the risk that I am telling teachers things they already know (it has been many years since I assisted in junior schools). However, part of what I am trying to show here is that Wittgenstein's approach in those schools in rural Austria nearly a century ago shows us something about the nature of language itself. That was an abiding, perhaps even obsessional, concern for Wittgenstein, and he drew on what we say and how we say it to show in his inimitable way, how our uses of language reflect and express many of the ancient concerns of philosophy. We as classroom teachers will for our part achieve a great deal if we can show, not tell, our pupils and students how their own language, however informal or colloquial, and their own use of it, are guides to formal grammar, guides they can use for themselves; and they would, if we planned our teaching appropriately, thereby learn their own language and learn about it.

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