



ENTREVISTA

ON GRAMMARS AND LANGUAGE. A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR RANDOLPH QUIRK

Carmen Muñoz
Universidad de Barcelona

— Professor Quirk, in our country your name is immediately associated with your very well-known book *A University Grammar of English* written in collaboration with Sidney Greenbaum and published in 1973 (UGE), and then also with its parent book *A Grammar of Contemporary English*, also with Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik, and published in 1972 (GCE). In many of our English departments the former has been and is widely used as “the” grammar of English. What is your own appreciation of UGE, and what importance do you think it has had in the field of English studies?

— That’s a very difficult question to answer because the role of UGE has varied from country to country. After all it’s not a coursebook. It is a book for sophisticated —if I may say so— teachers, and the kind of sophisticated students that they produce. But UGE is not a coursebook and therefore in many parts of the world it serves only as a reservoir of ideas for the eager teacher, the teacher trainer or the professor who is trying to help teachers devise teaching materials. That is its role in many countries —I think it’s not worth naming them— down through to highly sophisticated countries like Spain or Japan, where it is a hands-on book, not just for teachers but for students themselves. But of course it presupposes that students have been through a fair degree of schooling in English; in fact it’s called *A University Grammar of English* advisedly. It’s not merely addressed to adults, nor children, but addressed to people who are at university level of studying, so that there is a framework there which is really of a very considerable sophistication, and then of course, I should add that we are talking so far only of countries where English is a foreign language. It is also used in the United States where it is

published under a different title, *A Concise Grammar of Contemporary English*, but, nevertheless, it's the same book, as you know, and it's used in the U.K. and it's used in Australia and New Zealand. In these countries it is used for two purposes. It has two different audiences there. One is the student of EFL, like the people who teach English as a foreign language from British Council centres in Spain, for example. It is also used by students of linguistics in the U.K. and America.

Now, you at once see that for students of linguistics the book has a totally different sort of value. Students of linguistics after all are primarily concerned with evolving or at least evaluating different theories, different approaches to the impossible task of trying to see how language is structured, and the UGE like its parent book the GCE or its new macro rival *The Comprehensive Grammar of English* (CGE) are not theoretical grammars. They are deliberately not theoretical grammars. They are eclectic in their theoretical approaches, for the very good reason that there's no one theory of language, in our view, within which it is possible to describe a grammar of English or any other language. There're many theories of language, such as —I suppose above all— transformational generative theory, that are particularly attractive and, if more work could be done upon those theories, then it may well be that they will account for language structure. But if you are a student of linguistics —and you are a native English speaker, therefore you know everything that is in CGE or UGE, but of course it's not organized in your head, you can't sort of put it out— then you are studying immediate constituent theory, or tagmemic theory, or stratificational theory, or systemic theory, or Hudson's word theory, or system-dependency theory, or GG, or EST... You are able with the help of a good grammar that you use with everything in an eclectic way, to bring out data with which to confront that theory, test that theory. And of course if your theory is particularly powerful in one aspect or another, that theory may be able to challenge the way in which UGE presents things. But in general it's the other way round: UGE presents the theory with data, which the theory isn't able to cope with, and therefore the fun of linguistics is to bend that theory, to rewrite bits of it, to take it to bits legowise and stick only to one bit, so that you can account for that aspect.

So the uses of UGE are myriad. You also asked what sort of impact it had had. Clearly, by reason of the fact that there are many different kinds of uses, the impacts are as multifarious as the uses of it. But I suppose that among the achievements that the grammar has had has been to renew faith among linguists in the type of ambitious, brash, if you like, grammarian who says: "I will do it all. I won't just do a little bit, a fragment of English grammar,... or studies in English syntax, where you pick up the little bits that you find interesting or which you find your theory can account for very nicely." These do not constitute grammars of English because they are only fragmentary and they are not even complementary. If you learn a little bit of English grammar under one theory, a little bit of English grammar under a different theory, not

merely do they not add up to a totality of the language but they don't even mesh in with each other. It can be like trying to make a horse-car work with a Volkswagen, you know. So, we have renewed faith in the ability of a single team to view the English language, therefore any other language, as a totality.

This, I think, is particularly important in the case of English, where over the past twenty or thirty years there's been a different type of fragmentation from the one that we've been talking about. There've been, for perfectly expectable reasons, interests developing in individual manifestations of English: Black English, Australian English, so-called Indian English, anything but English, anything, of course above all anything but Standard English. These things have been sidestepped with the implication and sometimes the explication by some applied linguists that it doesn't exist, that there are many different Englishes. There's actually a periodical on the market at the moment in the United States called "World Englishes", which actually entails in its title that there isn't an English language, but there're several languages that happen to be called "English". With that sort of fragmentation, emphasis and interest, I think many teachers, many pupils have been reasonably enough deterred from the feeling that what they are learning for purely practical reasons, for career reasons—in order to get a job in IBM, in order to get a job in the hotel trade—is in fact a sort of partial thing. Whereas what you are teaching, what I am teaching, what UGE is teaching, is a world language. It's a world language which has not merely a central core, a sort of thin red line running through it, but is a solid mass of unique and unitary data with a periphery of things which are maybe very interesting, or maybe of some interest, like the fact that some Blacks talk in some ways which are different from the way in which you and I speak, that Aussies, or Indians, or whatever, have some different words or even different grammatical expressions; but these are peripheral. This, I believe, is the achievement of UGE, just as it's the achievement of the big, great dictionaries: the Webster dictionary, the Great Oxford. They are not dictionaries of American English, dictionaries of British English, but dictionaries of but dictionaries of English. There you can accommodate, even I would say, you must accommodate within the same book, within the same grammar or the same dictionary, the whole of English and be able to warn or advise the reader about the very few points or the peripheral expressions which are outside the norm.

That's one question?! You've got ten of these?

— Yes, I think you've already answered most of them. In fact my second one is related to the title of your lecture for today "Grammars, Dictionaries and Standard English", which made me think of something I heard Professor Crystal say. He claimed that the reason why he had chosen GCE and UGE as the basis for his course on "The Structure of English" was that this grammar, as compared with other grammars of English, pays proper attention to the

problems of acceptability. There was your previous work with Jan Svartvik *Investigating Linguistic Acceptability*...

— Yes, there was one book with Svartvik in the 60s called *Investigating Linguistic Acceptability*, published by Mouton, when we did certain types of psycholinguistic experiment. But then with Greenbaum we published a book with Longman called *Elicitation Experiments in English*. That is much closer now to the type of psycholinguistic work we do in *The Survey of English Usage*. But sorry, I've interrupted you. Crystal said that one of the reasons for choosing UGE was that it paid proper attention to acceptability...

— **To acceptability, and also to heterogeneity of varieties in the English language, by which he meant things like the inclusion of certain references to American English, not only British English, or the inclusion of good intonation transcriptions to better account for spoken English...**

— Yes. But you slipped one in there that I should have picked up earlier, when you were asking the first question. Crystal very rightly drew attention to the way in which the UGE reflects intonational and other prosodic aspects of English as reflected in the grammar. I should really have picked that up much earlier because I think that this is terribly important. The other big, full grammars of English like the one by the Dutchman Kruisinga, and those by Zandvoort, and Poutsma, as well as the grammar by the greatest of us all, Jespersen, were dealing with visual English only, English in print. And this for two reasons. One that electronics hadn't made the progress that has made it possible to investigate spoken English, but also the fact that it was never realised, I think, that every language really is organized on an oral basis, that the writing system can only very sophisticatedly represent what is going on between you and me now. And the second greatest achievement of UGE has been to integrate those aspects of spoken English which are not merely contributory to grammar, but which are an essential underpinning of grammar. The fact is that we speak in information units intonationally, and that the grammar is reflected in those, and organized in those. And although, if you look at the UGE or its parent book or the macro "Oxford", the prosodic thing seems to be tucked away in the Appendix, this is not so. What the appendix is doing is to say: "Look, just in case in chapter one or in chapter two you are not thoroughly familiar with what we are constantly talking about, with a falling intonation or high-speed rhythm or whatever it is, turn to Appendix two and you will get this thing". Now, Crystal very rightly mentioned this because his own greatest contribution to linguistics was that 1969 book called *Prosodic and Paralinguistic Features of English* published by Cambridge University Press, and which is still unchallenged as the authoritative book purely on prosody. Because before that, you see, phonology was boiled off as Daniel Jones-type of phonology, or Bloch and Trager-type of phonology, that is to

say a thing in itself that really had no bearing upon grammar or lexicology, that is highly uttered things like pronunciation and so on. And our achievement —although we shouldn't be very boastful because we all stand on the shoulders of Jones; we are all little pygmies and our great guys were born before and are dead— has been to show that the prosodic system —in our case of English, but we've been imitated by other languages— is the absolute basis for the description of the grammar of the language. Maybe true also for lexicology, but I'm not convinced about that. But then we have got to have a linguistic theory and we've got to have a linguistic description which is sufficiently responsive to the undoubted truth of 99.999% of all linguistic activity. And the 99.999% of all linguistic activity, even by highly literate folk, is speaking and hearing. So, a grammar which is descriptive only of a sample of the .001% of language activity has got something wrong with it.

— **And yet your grammar is based on educated, standard English. Do you think English teachers in an EFL situation, like Spain, should only or mostly be concerned with standard English?**

— Oh yes. No question whatever. I make the point in my lecture that any standard language, standard English as well, is the language of educated maturity and so far as natives are concerned, it's the form of language that one acquires last. After the language of home and peer group, locality, etc., it's the form we acquire last. With the foreign learner it is the form of language that you acquire first. And just as many natives by reason of misfortunes of birth or education never acquire the standard language, so it will happen, it does happen, quite inevitably happens, that with many foreign learners they never acquire anything else but the standard language. In other words, for the purposes that you are learning a modern language, the standard language is what you certainly need. And the number of people who need the languages of intimacy, of informality, of high degree specialization, is small.

— **So, what do you think is the role of a grammar like yours, let's say UGE, as opposed to a grammar specifically written for foreigners? How do you compare their roles, at university level?**

— This is really very difficult, because I am not, I have never been, a teacher of English as a foreign language. I believe that the descriptive linguist works without reference to the purposes to which his description will be put. You are in a much better position to say how this grammar can be used to further your aims, which are to teach Spaniards this form of language. What I do know is that if you are in your position, a grammar which was specifically written for natives is very, very defective for your purpose. Because those grammars which are written for use by natives, or grammatical descriptions or compendia of grammatical information, such as Fowler, which are written to

guide typists and school teachers and lawyers and bank clerks, in Britain and America, inevitably assume a full knowledge of the language to begin with and therefore they are dealing only with peripheral areas of stylistic doubt that exist within the native English politics. They are in no way a complete description of the language.

Par contraire, if one tried to teach the UGE in an English department in Britain or America the students would fall asleep, because they know the language and you are laboriously telling them that the difference between the plural of "horse" and "cat" is that the plural of "horse" will end in /iz/ and the plural of "cat" will end in /s/. We shouldn't be surprised then to hear a student say: "What is this man trying to teach me? I knew this from the age of three. Of course I didn't know any of these pompous terms. When I wanted to refer to two of those four-legged animals I said "horses", and nobody ever told me that I was adding /iz/ to "horse". I can't take that!"

So that this is why I said, when we were talking about the uses to which the UGE was put in the native English environment, it is only for those sophisticated students who are trying to understand linguistic theory and confronting data that they know but is not otherwise organized in the native's head. It's made explicit there. They're using the data they are familiar with to confront linguistic theory. I think that that really sort of answers your question.

— I wanted to make a reference to the fact that GCE has been used to write a communicative grammar like *A Communicative Grammar of English* by Leech and Svartvik, which is addressed to English teachers and learners. It has also been used in the field of psycholinguistics by Crystal, Fletcher and Garman to establish steps in the profiling of linguistic disability. And then Garman did some very nice work on the normal development of child language based on the system of profiles, as well. What do you think of these applications? Have you ever been tempted to undertake applied research yourself?

— A good question. GCE has indeed been used as the basis for making psycholinguistic profile experiments. Yes indeed, personally I am extremely interested in an applied linguistics which has nothing to do with foreign language teaching, but with helping those who are linguistically disabled among the native English speakers, by which I mean the children who are born with neurological defects, people who are on the increase in our societies all over the world. Why are they on the increase? Because our prenatal, perinatal and postnatal care is so very much better now that babies who are prenatally at risk are now cared for, brought into the world, and survive to a vastly higher degree than was once the case, which means that we are preserving children that would under ordinary circumstances have died, either in the womb or

shortly afterwards. And so these constitute —the spastics and the Down syndrome children, etc.— an enormous challenge, because if you are born with a physical defect it usually connotes a neurological defect. Obviously the most sensitive, the most sophisticated neuromechanisms are those that enable us to realize humanity's greater single achievement, I mean the faculty of language. So the faculty of language is always affected in these children.

You get something like a little Christy Brown, that marvellous Irish novelist —now unhappily deceased: he died at the age of about thirty— who was born unable to speak, unable to move any muscle. He had a very caring Irish catholic mother, who noticed —when he was sprawled on the floor in their working-class home in Dublin at the age of four— that the child was able to move some of the toes of one foot to bring something towards him. She put a piece of chalk between those toes and taught him to write. His first and best novel was called *Down All the Days* and he wrote it about three years before he was finally deceased. He never learnt to speak, but did learn that act of being able to write, by means of which he revealed to his mother, to his siblings and, through *Down All the Days*, the rest of us, not merely that he could utter but also that the input mechanisms of his neurological system were totally perfect. He was able to do all of the things: understand, hear, observe, criticize, fear, love... So yes, indeed, for the sake of these people, who are on the increase, I think that we, in linguistics, have got an enormous contribution to make. This is something, frankly, that is very much more important socially than the work that you and I do.

Then there is the other end of the scale, the end of the scale that I am fast approaching: geriatric, where just as the language mechanisms are very frail in the young so they are very frail in maturity and post-maturity. We helped nurse a dear lady whose name will be very familiar to you: Hornby. That was A.S. Hornby's widow, A.S. Hornby's collaborator, and she was a most intelligent woman, one of the most intelligent women that we've ever met. She was a tiny, tiny woman, bird-like intelligence, and for the last year of her existence she was stricken, and she lost her language faculty. She lost probably more than her language faculty, but when you cease to be able to utter, it becomes extremely difficult to know how much you are able to input, as with Christy Brown at the other end. And the support for geriatrics linguistically, the teaching of a simplified retention system of part of the teaching of a simplified retention system of part of the language faculty is vastly important, because they again are a growing part of our population. Just as the linguistically disabled young are growing in numbers, so by reason again of the superficial improvements in medicine, we are kept alive longer. Most of us, who'd blessedly have died at the age of sixty-five or whatever, long before our language mechanisms had decayed, are now living to ninety. And the last five years or ten years, according to our bad luck, we become vegetables if we are not able to ask for something, if we are not able to share our thoughts. It happens extraordinarily rapidly. So there, in both those areas, a great deal of linguistic work needs to

be done. Yes of course, I would love to do it, but equally I know of course that I should not be able to, because I've got a lot of things to do and very little time to do it. It is better, I think, to go on getting the descriptive mechanism right rather than start off and trying to do something else, where undoubtedly we couldn't have the know-how to make a contribution.

But, you see, I think this is very important, that people who are pastured in certain areas can use what energies they've got left to stimulate the young and the bright and the beautiful, to do something, right? I try to do this sort of thing. There is an organization in Britain called "The College of Speech Therapists" and it is the body that licenses to practice all of the speech pathologists in the U.K. There're about seven or eight thousand, and they're all members of this college. They get their licenses to practice through it, and I am the president. I am the president because they want me to make sure that they get high rates of pay and I'm very interested that they should get high rates of pay, but I'm far more interested that research should be undertaken, that they should get better training, and that research units in universities should develop. Then I'm able to pull money in to units like the Department of Linguistics in University College, the department who trained Crystal, and which is a very, very strong unit. They are working with electronic instruments, putting into electronic, into hardware practice the sort of observations about language behaviour that we have made in the *Survey of English Usage*.

— This is a very interesting new field that you've just mentioned. How much research is being done on it nowadays?

— Very much, very much. There's great deal of work in artificial intelligence going on for all kinds of military purposes. But much of that artificial intelligence work is, I believe, adaptable to support for the linguistically disabled. I didn't mention the bunch in the middle, by the way, the people who suffer accidents on the road, and have brain damage. But I don't think they are a growing serious population as compared with the young and the old. But even in the development of hearing aids, you see, we've made fast progress. The kind of hearing aid that you can get now is based on the analysis of the sound spectrum, totally unknown about when hearing aids were devised sixty or seventy years ago, when all one was doing was to increase the volume so that you were, in fact, magnifying the wide noise around you. If you use an old hearing aid, it's most unpleasant to hear it because you can certainly hear things, but what is magnified is that damned vacuum cleaner and the traffic noise, not just human speech.

So there's a lot of work going on, yes. Not nearly enough of course. But I'm very suspicious about applied research because when you are looking for one particular thing, although it'd seem a very economical way of setting about it, in fact it's a very expensive and often futile way. The great discoveries that have been made have been made by great men and women who were

investigating 'natura rerum' without any goal as to what application might be made of this. What I want to help to put money into is organizations where you identify very, very good minds and a broad direction of research, and then turn them loose, and they turn up things and they don't see any value in them, and then somebody else comes and says Crikey, that links up with something that I'm doing". He is the chap that turns this into the nuts and bolts of an application.

Remember that electricity, this stuff around here, was devised by a man called Faraday sitting in the Royal Institution in London. When William Pitt came in, he demonstrated that a filament lit up as he turned a little handle, and William Pitt said to him: "But what use will this be Mr. Faraday?" and Faraday said: "Prime Minister, I have no idea, but one thing I'm sure of: that if it turns out to have a use you will tax it".

— Indeed! Finally, I would like to ask you a question about your vast grammar *A Comprehensive Grammar of English*, published in 1985. When I read the interview with Professor Leech published in this journal a few years ago (No. 7; november 1983), it gave me the impression that the writing of that grammar was a very smooth task, that all four of you were old friends. What are your own impressions about this very long standing collaboration?

— Yes, I've been very, very lucky. I've had extremely good students. David Crystal is one that you know. He did his PhD with me on that area I'm talking about: the prosodic systems, in the sixties. He was a research assistant on "The Survey", and I'm very happy that although he was not associated with GCE—he was at that time at Bangor before he moved to Reading—he was associated with CGE, and turned one of his latter interests—taxonomy and indexing—to making the very, very valuable index of CGE, which is far more than an index. Jan Svartvik was a graduate student of mine. He did his PhD on the passive with me in London and then became a paid worker on "The Survey of English Usage", and we never lost touch with each other. We collaborated, as you know, on that book called *Investigating Linguistic Acceptability*. Geoffrey Leech did his PhD with me also at University College on a semantic description of English, and became, in consequence, one of the really innovative thinkers in semantics. And Greenbaum walked in off the street one day—he was doing a PhD on medieval studies at Birkbeck College—and had heard about "The Survey", sat in on a few lectures, jettisoned his PhD on medieval studies and switched over to work on a PhD called *Studies in English Adverbial Usage*, which was published in 1969. And while we were all working together, not Crystal now but Leech, Svartvik and Greenbaum, and me, we thought: "Isn't it time that we tried to make public all that we are doing on 'The Survey'? We think that we are describing English marvellously but it's only us". Because we were doing only monographs, a bit on the passive, a bit on this and a bit on that, and there were only partial

papers on the actual "Survey". So, we thought: "Well, let's do a book which just gets our thinking and puts it out, so that Bolinger in Palo Alto, Stein in Germany, and all the rest of these people can see it and write to us with their comments". We thought of this as a printed pre-print. Mr. Longman comes along and says: "yes, OK. We'll publish it for you. We'll publish about five hundred copies". "As many as that? Oh, here, we don't need as many as that, you know, two or three hundred." "Well, then, to make it economical we'd better publish five hundred." But we were greatly embarrassed by the fact that it sold about five thousand per year, for many years, as if we'd put this out as the definitive work, and it was never intended to be a definitive work. It was just a try-on to get reaction from our peers and the rest of the world. But anyway, since it appeared to satisfy a need then we decided, right there and then, that we would make improved derivatives: *The Communicative Grammar* and *UGE*, improved derivatives from that book, which would then become the new foundation for a much bigger and more definitive treatment, which we hoped we would produce about 1979 or 1980 at the very, very latest. Well, of course, time runs on and it was 1985 before we got this now more definitive version, which is as good as we thought we would ever make it. We would never collaborate on any thing of that scale again. But it worked. We are satisfied with CGE in a way that we were certainly not satisfied before. And reviews had been terribly kind about GCE (1972), terribly kind. There've been very, very few bad reviews, and many, many, many good reviews. But we have been embarrassed by the fact that because of the handsome way in which Longman presented it, some of those very good people could think: "Good grief, Quirk *et al.* actually think this is the last word in English grammar". We never thought of it that way. But CGE is a different little revision.

I am unable to answer a question with "yes" or "no", I'm afraid!

— **You've been very generous. Thanks so much for your valuable time.**

— It's a great pleasure to talk to you.

— **Thank you.**

(This Interview took place on 20 April, 1988, in Barcelona and appears here in an unedited transcript.)