

New paradigms in teaching languages to adults, focusing on Hungarian

In the last two decades western societies have been going through a series of big crises and changes. Consequently how we look at human sciences and how we teach them are changing as well. The way we teach languages is deeply affected by all these conditions, especially when considering life long learning – that is teaching to adults – and/or teaching less taught languages.

The need for new teaching models is clearly experienced at the university, where the two cases combine. Having studied Hungarian as a foreigner and teaching it now to foreign students, I directly met these questions on both sides. I am now publishing a book on teaching Hungarian at university in Italy based on my teaching practice¹, trying to face these changes through the implementation of the Functional Grammar² and the Functional Discourse Grammar³.

The main idea is to bring language knowledge as close as possible to the necessities of contemporary life in a multicultural environment that is offering colloquial and working opportunities at least, while keeping and widening the competences offered by higher education whenever necessary. This scope is quite far from that of the established higher education focused on (traditional) grammar and culture, although we must recognise that if a university is also supposed to prepare future teachers (and not only), then grammar and culture can't be missed in one's career.

My work has also been inspired by Cook's book »Portraits of the L2 user«⁴, which depicts the situation of language teaching more clearly. This point is well abridged by the distinction of »lan-

¹ Driussi 2012.

² Abbreviated FG. See Dik 1997.

³ Abbreviated FDG. See Hengeveld/McKenzie 2008.

⁴ Cook 2002.

guage learning« and »language acquisition«⁵. According to Cook, didactics must not only recognize this difference, but also apply it to teaching models. For the colloquial and working competence (that can comprise also translation and interpretation skills) students must be able to speak the language automatically, almost like a mother-tongue speaker. For that, no grammar is needed⁶. Many language manuals, though, still teach conversational patterns mixing them with some grammar and drill patterns. The European syllabuses focus on linguistic abilities in everyday usage with a plethora of lexical competence, but the time needed for learning them takes students away from practice in learning the structures and understanding the cultural milieu of the given language.

Language teaching in the Italian universities is an interesting defly under this respect because of the small amount of teaching hours. Moreover, Hungarian is taught in Italy almost only to non-Hungarians.

My book was conceived in order to teach Hungarian to the biggest possible number of students to learn it at the highest possible level. But problems come when defining teaching scopes. As Cook puts it, some only need to study the way to use a language for example for work⁷. The number of such people is steadily growing. Others study a language in order to teach it or to use it with refined competences like translating or writing special texts, therefore they must acquire it in a deeper way.

As we have already seen Cook is convinced that in order to »only« learn a language people do not need any knowledge on grammar, and the teaching methods should take this into account. This idea is obviously quite far from the most common patterns. The same communicative model, which is perhaps still too widespread in our days, tends to explain grammar in order to widen the speakers' competences.

General linguists might even discuss whether these grammatical presentations are correct. These doubts arise when students

⁵ This opposition is especially considered in De Bot-Lowie-Verspoor 2005, 9.

⁶ Use of grammar in teaching is questioned, among others, by Cook 2002 and by Scalzo 2005.

⁷ Cook 2002, 3–5.

work with more than one language, and have to learn different descriptions and explanations for similar grammatical functions and their structures. These are the reasons why I try to keep language teaching and grammar teaching distinct, as Cook suggests, while making an effort to teach grammatical constructions applicable to all languages. To do this, I had also to reflect about the scopes of teaching, helped by the Italian university model, where mother tongue »tutors« make students practice the languages, while lecturers teach frontally, possibly subjects that can improve the competence of the students.

I hope that confronting my thoughts on the subject can lead to a fruitful discussion about the actual language teaching. This is a target that is probably a natural step in university researches, and not only on languages but in didactics as well.

I believe the best way to introduce my thoughts is by explaining the structure of the book⁸, that also reflects my way of teaching, regarding especially the order of presenting the different subjects.

First, I had to face the key issue concerning the learning mechanisms of adults. There is a wide range of literature on the subject, but still, I didn't meet with any models that would present more than the first steps in learning and/or acquiring a language⁹. After a certain point all manuals start explaining clauses and their adverbials through grammar. Moreover, in all the cases I met, students were required to be motivated to reach adequate results. I strongly believe, though, that any serious students can reach good results however they are taught, but the point today is that we need to offer good knowledge (please note: knowledge, not necessary competence) to the highest possible number of people.

University courses are also supposed to teach adequate competences, though, in order students acquire a language and use its many facets. I usually tell students who claim they only want to meet people and speak with them, that going to Hungary and fall in love is a quicker and less expensive method than studying at university.

⁸ Driussi 2012.

⁹ Many possible approaches are well abridged in the articles of the book edited by Serra Borneto, 2005.

The distinction between practice with a mother tongue tutor and front lectures suggested the first steps to be taken, which corresponds to the aforementioned attitude listed by Cook.

When teaching adults we must notice that students have previous knowledge¹⁰, which again adds to the asymmetrical competences in grammar among the eventually known languages.

I was therefore inclined to have students automatically reproducing structures of the target language, as we have seen it being pointed out by Cook. To be able to accomplish building up knowledge by simple consequent steps I believe that we must avoid learning difficult structures together, or structures that compose different parts of the speech. This is how the whole book is built up, taking functionalism to its extremes. The need to exercise, to practice is always considered of utmost importance.

A necessary first step is the introduction to the general mechanisms of the linguistic communication. I tell the students about theoretical issues, not specific for the taught language, but that can be applied also to their mother tongue, and I try to do it with as little grammatical terminology and methods as possible.

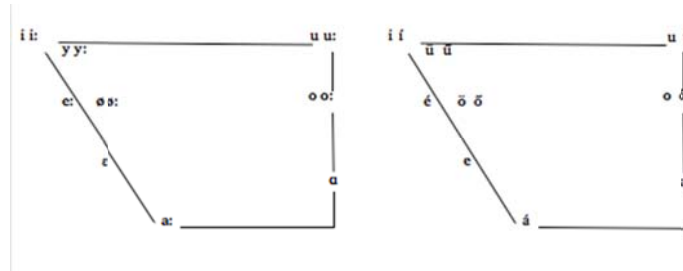
Within this more general presentation of the language as a means of communication I introduce from this very first moment the concepts of Theme and Rheme together with the Topic and Focus. The point is to make students understand the difference between the strictly formal devices and the suprasegmental and/or emotional devices of the speaker.

Introducing the Focus gets obviously a special role due to its importance in Hungarian. Pragmatics in this initial part of teaching is very important also because adults often ask about the ways of the language mechanisms. In most cases this presentation helps the students to better understand some features of their mother tongue, and consequently we can also loosen the difficulties that learning a new code may induce.

The first necessary step in studying a language is to learn its sounds correctly and their corresponding orthographical signs. I suggest to teach it via the IPA, and I always start my explanations by making students conscious of their phonatory systems. Students will

¹⁰ Upon this admission is based the article by Cook, 2002a.

understand about their parts of the body by paying attention to the way sounds are produced by themselves. This is a demanding effort, and needs quite a long time. I am convinced that it is a very important step. Putting side by side the IPA model and its correspondences in Hungarian makes this effort relatively simple.



The IPA transcription of Hungarian vowels and their graphical correspondences

The use of images and the awareness of the phonatory system allows the immediate understanding of mistakes and their correction during the lessons as well, because the teacher can simply recall an explanation which is always the same: it does not depend on the hearing of sounds, as strange as it can be.

Then it comes to the basic forms of the language: substantives and adjectives of the lexicon, properties by which a speaker can describe the world: *szék; ház; csinos; szorgalmas; tanár; szabadság; épület; portás; tér; széles; ajtó; fehér; görög ...* The central importance of the lexicon is manifest especially in contemporary theories, among which cognitivism deserves a special mention.

Hungarian substantives and adjectives do not differ, but in some derived forms. Therefore morphology has a minimal role here. What is very important, though, according to functionalist views, is the central place of phrases in communication. As to Hungarian, it has already been described in the functional grammar of László Hadrovics¹¹. Introducing articles and plural forms (which are

¹¹ Hadrovics 1969, passim.

only grammatical instruments, called operators in functionalism, not lexical ones) helps to understand the structure of a phrase.

The simplest clausal structures in Hungarian are the nominal predications, which relate many possible phrases. Hence students can produce the first clauses, even complex ones, such as *A szorgalmas diák a görög fiú*.

[A fiú]	[diák]
[A görög fiú]	[diák]
[A görög fiú]	[egy szorgalmas diák]
[A fiúk]	[diákok]
[A diákok]	[görögök]
[A ház]	[magas]
[Az épület]	[egy híres szálloda]
[A házak]	[régiek]
[A magas épületek]	[szép házak]

These clauses are far from communicative-oriented forms, but with an adequate number of terms students can reach unexpected satisfaction in expressing themselves. The structure of phrases introduces the characteristic restriction that modifiers are to be placed before the heads in most cases.

Hopefully students will acquire these non-communicative structures and produce (and understand) them almost automatically. They can still continue practicing them without syntactical changes if personal nominal suffixes are introduced, and right at this point I teach the suffixes that are normally labelled as »possessive« and »personal«.

By teaching both personal and demonstrative pronouns, nominal predications are almost completely described, while students still concentrate only on phrase structures and monovalent predications, that is: they acquire new morphosyntactic strategies without having to learn new clausal features.

[A diák táskája]	[nagy]
[A diák nagy táskái]	[feketék]
[A szálloda híres vezetője]	[egy görög tanár]
[Két gyermeke]	[szorgalmas diák]
[Ez]	[egy finom torta]

[Ez a torta]	[nagyon finom]
[Te]	[orvos vagy]
[Mi]	[magas olasz nők vagyunk]
[A szobád]	[rendetlen]
[Rendetlen]	[a szobád]

At this point I introduce the negation particles. Practicing it requires more attention on the function of the Focus, which has already been discussed, but still does not require the knowledge of new language structures.

While still working on these simple monovalencies I can tell students about the verbs and the Hungarian verbal system.

Hungarian is characterised by two conjugational forms, which functionally **MUST** be introduced together. Consequently, any questions that arise from students about possible communicative intentions can be answered, and I can also explain why I haven't introduced them yet. In fact the basic functions of the verbal system are covered by the two conjugations, enriched with the *-lak*, *-lek* forms.

In order to avoid too many arguments I offer a scheme of the present indicative forms of both conjugations. In this case I keep the traditional terminology of »present indicative«: please note it's only the second time I use categories of the traditional grammar description after having introduced the basic ones. I have still doubts about using them, though.

By the way, I can now switch to showing monovalent predications with verbs using parallel structures of nominal and verbal predications. I suggest therefore that *Péter diák* is parallel with *Péter alszik*, or with *A tanár dolgozik* and that *Szorgalmas a diák* can be compared with *Halad a busz*, or rather that *Te diák vagy* is like *Te olvasol* and so on. I can also show these parallels visually:

[Péter]	[diák]
[Péter]	[alszik]
[A tanár]	[dolgozik]
[Szorgalmas]	[a diák]
[Halad]	[a busz]

[Te] [diák vagy]
[Te] [olvasol]

I usually ask students not to try to learn all conjugational forms by heart: in my opinion it is more important that they do practice by producing many examples rather than trying to remember something that can be misrendered, because it subtracts time from practicing. Students can make for themselves one simple page that contains the most important tables and cases and that must be checked every time they produce a clause. Such a scheme contains conjugations and personal suffixes, plurals and the copula so far. Practicing makes students remember the forms.

The following possible step is to introduce the argument markers, that is, how languages realize valencies of the lexicon. I explain how, almost like the lexicon itself, markers change between languages. This is the reason why lexical properties must be studied together with their required argument markers:

közel vmihez
mond vmit
beszél vmiről
feladja magát

There is no verb *találkozik* in the lexicon, only *találkozik vkivel!*

At this point I can speak about suffixes, and I introduce the fact that the form rendered with *-t*, or *-(V)t* is a special suffix in Hungarian, because it is the only to be used with both conjugations. One conjugation can only be used when the term linked with the *-t* is already known, and therefore can be substituted with a relative pronoun: I call this conjugation »pronominal«. The other conjugation, which I call »absolute«, is used in all other situations and is therefore taught first.

But Hungarian uses many other argument markers of which I explain morphosyntax, while avoiding any labelling as well as indicating possible functions: these are »only« compulsory cases.

Now I can introduce bivalent structures and make more complex clauses. I ask to use among them also verbs that require the *-t* marker and the »pronominal« conjugation:

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	[vki]	[felvon]	[vmit]
	[vki]	[társalog]	[vkivel]
	[vki/vmi]	[közeledik]	[vkihez/vmihez]
	[vki/vmi]	[közel áll]	[vmihez/vkihez]
	[vki]	[betakar]	[vmit] [vmivel]

My idea is to show regular structures of the language at the beginning of the learning process, structures that can be recorded and used almost automatically so that instead of thinking students grasp them, know them, almost like mothertongue speakers.

In my opinion the most difficult part of this work is to find appropriate examples. Students have only to apply the given schemes so that they can learn more lexemes together with the forms of conjugation and declination.

Only the next subject is normally introduced early in manuals: the space suffixes and the description of space movements in Hungarian.

HOL?	HONNAN?	HOVA?
-ban, -ben	-ból, -ből	-ba, -be
-n (-on, -en, -ön) fölött	-ról, -ről	-ra, -re (főlé)
-nál, -nél mellett	-tól, -től mellől (, felől)	-hoz, -hez, -höz mellé (, felé)

Overall picture of many spatial cases

I have already introduced some of their forms as argument markers, now I show some of their functions (only locative ones, at this point) as adverbials¹², which can help inserting them in the overall scheme for the Hungarian language structure.

After having acquired the fundamentals of the clause, students can expand, or rather restrict its parts, as called in the functionalist theory. Again, I introduce only one subject at a time. I do not have to explain different structures of the clause together, only the insertion of one specific type of the adverbials. Moreover, students already know how to link suffixes to the roots, from learning morphosyntax of the argument markers. Now they have to practice to restrict basic clauses, so they can concentrate on communicative skills and the lexicon. Therefore it is possibly easier to start showing metaphorical uses of the suffixes.

I don't use the traditional labelling of the adverbials and the suffixes but present the forms of the needed functions, so I don't correspond markers (that is »cases«, for example) and adverbials. That makes functional grammar crucial. It requires systematical work on the nuances between similar functions. Therefore I never distinguish locatives in the traditional way, but the »local« form, the »origin« and the »target«. I dare say that we might also insert for example *-ig* and *-nAk* as »terminatives« in the table.

Now teaching continues on the same track: one subject/argument per lesson, practice in order to make listening and understanding as well as production almost automatic, introducing new subject/arguments according to a hopefully »obvious« necessity of restricting (modifying) the information. Clauses have in fact already been taught with all their parts. Any new information is only a specification, an opportunity for better communication, but nothing introduces new structures up to the complex sentences, only refines what students have already been studying. This takes a lot of time, because we can introduce all the verbal forms and the adverbials. However, it is rather a question of lexicon and clear cut functions, than of morphosyntax, and by now students have hopefully practised the structures of the language a lot.

¹² Dik names them »restrictors« in Dik 1997, which term proves to be very useful in teaching.

The last step is the introduction of complex sentences. It is often quite simple in Hungarian because of the wide use of cataphoric elements. In all other cases I explain them in the spirit of Hadrovics' description of »indirect clauses«¹³. Here functionalism helps to avoid using the grammatical terminology, but it especially clarifies the relationship among clauses in the light of a model that is applicable to all languages while giving a reason for the basics of language-specific clause structures.

This method offers a consequent and coherent presentation of the language with a minimum of grammatical information and some more linguistic concepts that can be useful also in following phases of learning.

I would like to note that I avoid to use the traditional grammar terminology, and do not follow the traditional ways of describing parts of the speech. Functions are at the focus instead. According to universal grammars many functions are widely shared by different languages, and therefore already known by the students from their mother tongues, so this might facilitate to show and teach a new way of communication. Moreover, I am deeply convinced that this way students will work better in general linguistics, and eventually learn also traditional grammatical terminologies in their later career.

What is still missing is how to teach to build up a discourse in newly acquired languages, although it is a target to be taught in the universities.

I hope that the critical remarks and the observations of my colleagues will help me to understand whether theoretical linguistics and linguistics applied to didactics may bring about a model both for learning and studying languages first of all at the university level. I am convinced that multidisciplinary approaches will allow a higher level of research and methods.

Functional grammars among them, despite their confined use, prove to be helpful to understand certain linguistic structures and functions, and connect them to the practical analysis of spoken languages.

¹³ Hadrovics 1969, 192–280.

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