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Rule and Meaning in the Teaching of Grammar

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Introduction

It is now possible to employ a fully communicative approach to language teaching while at the same time attending to grammatical structure, but only if one can decisively abandon a mindset in which structure consists of rules governing form only and fully adopt instead a view that structure consists of forms that encode meanings, which speakers choose in order to communicate messages.

Across a wide range of linguistic theoretical frameworks, the construct of the *rule* (i.e., a manipulation of purely formal properties of language) has been rejected as a device of grammatical description. This change includes both the most formal of traditions, principally the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995), and the most functional, among them systemic functional linguistics (Halliday 2004), Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987), the Columbia School (Diver 1995), and construction-based functionalist linguistics (see e.g. Noonan 1999).

The field of second-language acquisition (SLA) has followed suit to some extent. Terrell (1991) envisioned language acquisition without rules in this sense—what we will refer to subsequently as ‘f-rules.’ Larsen-Freeman (2003) retains f-rules only as statistical artifacts of communication, the fallout of speakers’ choices of meaningful form. The importance of this notion of rule has declined as work in theoretical, particularly functional, linguistics finds its way into applications in language education (e.g. Miller 1996, Langacker 2001, Mohan and Beckett 2001, Hirtle 2007). Yet f-rules have far from disappeared in SLA (e.g. Long 1996, DeKeyser 2001, R. Ellis 2002).

The construct that stands foremost to replace the f-rule as a device to account for the distribution of forms is that of linguistic *meaning*. The construct of linguistic meaning, however, is also theoretically heterodox and prone to confusion with other conceptualizations of meaning.

While the terms *rule* and *meaning* are not—and perhaps need not be—used identically in linguistics and in language teaching, clarity about both would further dialogue, understanding, and practice.

This article illustrates, with authentic examples and a variety of grammatical domains, how grammar always involves meaningful form, sometimes transparently, sometimes less so. It examines the variety of uses of the terms *rule* and *meaning* in linguistics and in SLA, as well as their relation to *form* and briefly reviews the history of the concept of the form-meaning connection (FMC) in linguistics and SLA and offer a needed extension for SLA. Finally, it offers practical steps that teacher-educators can take to base their pedagogy less on arbitrary rules and more on meaning.

Towards a meaningful grammar

With certain aspects of grammar, meaning is so transparently involved that it would be hard to convince anyone to ignore it. There may be complexities in usage that puzzle us, but most examples are so obvious that we readily imagine meaning being involved even in the hard cases that we may not be able easily to explain. Such is the case with the tenses, where we feel strongly that the semantic concept of Time is involved: *He left yesterday. She leaves tomorrow.* We are convinced that Time is somehow involved even if we are not quite ready to explain the difference between *She leaves tomorrow* and *She will leave someday.*

This section will look at noun Number, verb Number, and pronominal case as domains of grammatical meaning.

Noun Number

Noun Number clearly suggests a semantic basis. Consider this example from an authentic text:¹

While he set a record of thirteen *years* playing with the Davis cup *team*, he captained it for only fourteen *months*, citing scheduling *frustrations* when he resigned.

Information in the immediate context (*thirteen, fourteen*) confirms that reference is being made to more than one year and to more than one month, respectively. (Notice that *-s* in these two cases is unlikely to be the semantically vacuous reflex of a syntactic agreement f-rule.) Once we know that the *-s* suffix is a signal of the meaning MORE THAN ONE, we are ready to interpret the word *frustrations* too as referring to more than one, even absent supporting context.

The meaning that stands in opposition to MORE THAN ONE is, naturally, ONE, and it too has its signal: The null or zero suffix, $-\emptyset$, the significant absence of *-s*. Once we know that $-\emptyset$ has a meaning, we can use that knowledge to help us interpret a text. Thanks to the absence of *-s* on *team- \emptyset* above, we know, even before processing the following *it*, that our protagonist played on ONE Davis cup team.

Reid (1991) lays out these *signal-meaning* relationships as in Figure 1. He also offers extensive and insightful analysis of many less transparent cases, such as *sheep, people*, and *economics*, with the result that we begin to see meaning as the factor behind the choice of noun Number across the board.²

Figure 1. Noun Number in English (after Reid 1991: 46)

<u>Semantic domain</u>	<u>meaning</u>	<u>signal</u>
Number	ONE	-∅
	MORE THAN ONE	-s

Verb Number

While noun Number rather transparently suggests a semantic treatment, verb Number has typically been viewed as the reflex of an f-rule—the rule of subject-verb agreement—and this despite the traditional labeling of verbal *-s* with the quasi-semantic terms of third person, singular, present tense.

Reid (1991) has shown that English verbal *-s* is in fact independently meaningful. He analyzes scores of authentic, contextual examples from standard English, including this pair:

‘Heaven and hell is not about ending up in two different places,’ says moral theologian James Burtchaell of the University of Notre Dame. *‘It’s about ending up in this life, and forever in the next, being two very different kinds of persons. It’s about character, not context.’* In other words, *heaven and hell are* no longer thought of as different locations, with separate ZIP codes, but radically opposed states of intimacy with and alienation from God. (p. 231).

Far from being redundant, singular *is* prompts an interpretation—as my students readily point out—of the first *heaven and hell* as one theological concept, the afterlife. Plural *are* prompts a more routine interpretation of the second *heaven and hell* as two places.

Reid’s hypothesis (Figure 2) is strictly of the *signal-meaning* type, making no appeal to agreement with the subject of the clause. The semantic substance, or domain, covered by the verb forms, called Focus Number, is divided into two meanings, ONE and MORE THAN ONE, with the signals *-s* and *-∅*, respectively. For Reid (p. 171), these suffixes do not reflect mechanically whether the grammatical subject is singular or plural; rather, “The meanings ONE and MORE THAN ONE indicate the number of entities upon which attention is being concentrated with respect to the Occurrence,” or event, named by the lexical stem to which the suffix is attached.

Figure 2. The English Focus Number System (adapted from Reid, 1991: 171)

<u>Semantic domain</u>	<u>meaning</u>	<u>signal</u>	
Number of Entities	ONE	<i>-s</i>	(also <i>is, was, has</i>)
IN Focus	MORE THAN ONE	<i>-∅</i>	(also <i>are, were, have</i>)

It is not at all difficult to find authentic examples in English illustrating the semantic contribution of the verb form.³ For instance, when the subject does not signal Number, the ending on the verb clearly has information value.

. . . most of Morales’s photographs of young men jumping from Acapulco cliffs are reserved and reportorial. The best of them *capture-∅* their subjects midair.

By itself, *the best of them* could be one or more than one; the verb ending tells us that the capturing is done by MORE THAN ONE. (That interpretation is then supported by *their*.) Other

common subjects that do not signal number include *what, which, who, more, most, some, any, all, mine*.⁴

In the following pair of sentences, the subjects are syntactically comparable but the verb numbers differ, each suggesting a different inferential path.

What happened with Alzheimer's in the seventies and the eighties wasn't simply a diagnostic paradigm shift. The number of new cases really *is* soaring.

Since a small number of people *have* naturally high levels of testosterone, the I.O.C. [International Olympic Committee] avoided the risk of falsely accusing anyone by setting the legal limit at 6:1.

Is in the first of the pair signals Focus on ONE thing with respect to the present state of soaring; the inference is that a single quantity is rapidly increasing. *Have* in the second of the pair signals Focus on MORE THAN ONE; the inference is that multiple individuals, each separately, have high levels of testosterone.⁵

In perhaps the most illuminating examples, the verb ending prompts the reader to reinterpret the subject in a less obvious way.

Reparations—for slavery and the slave trade—*was* the other sticking point about Powell's attendance. But that impasse was resolved.

Inference: Think of reparations not as multiple compensations but as a single political issue.

A pair of estranged brothers (Ethan Hawke and Arliss Howard) *confront-Ø* each other after the death of their father, in Sam Shepard's latest play.

Inference: These brothers may be a pair, but they aren't acting like one.

Perhaps English is more flexible in this way than some other languages, but it is not unique. Consider Spanish (from a native speaker, referring to students at a college):

La mayoría tienen Bs ¿no?

'The majority have (pl.) Bs, right?'

If such authentic, contextual examples are taken seriously as data, then the relationship between subject and verb Number begins to look like one of *correlation*—what was earlier termed the statistical fallout of communication—not one of structural, syntactic *correspondence*. Subject and verb number are typically the same, but not always. In a (standard English) text that Reid counted exhaustively, about one per cent of tokens showed lack of agreement. This suggests that, for native speakers, making verb and noun Number the same or not is a matter of choice (conscious or not), a question of communicative intent. Where communication is coherent, meaningful forms of many stripes will tend to point in the same direction. This choice is in principle, then, not entirely different from the choice between, say, *Come in and make yourself comfortable / uncomfortable*: One is statistically preferred for pragmatic reasons, but the other can certainly be said if it meets a speaker's need.

While Reid's account has been influential, its radical implications have not been fully appreciated. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: 59-60, n. 10), calling Reid's analysis "excellent," draw upon it, but only to account for "problematic cases" where the "general agreement rule" fails to hold. In fact, however, Reid's claim is that meaning accounts for *all* instances of verb number, including the typical cases where subject and verb agree. So for example, both of the following asterisked sentences are highly unlikely to occur in standard English, while their checked counterparts are the norm.

- * The boy eat candy. √ The boy eats candy.
- * The boys eats candy. √ The boys eat candy.

The reason for these facts is the same as the reason for the apparently "problematic cases." The *-s* of *eats* signals Focus on ONE, which is the only meaning that is semantically compatible with the ONE of *boy-Ø*, at least in contexts that are readily imaginable or frequently occurring.

Likewise, Focus on MORE THAN ONE, signaled by the *-Ø* of *eat*, is the only suitable companion for the MORE THAN ONE of *boy-s*. The reason there appears to be less of a choice here than in foregoing cases is, as Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman themselves recognize, that the semantic content of the lexical item *boy* is evidently more tied to individuation than that of, say, *pair*.

There is only one way to count a boy, but there is more than one way to count a pair.⁶

Pronominal case

It might still be objected that there are certain instances of 100% correspondence between forms and that these, at least, can be considered semantically empty, purely formal f-rules. It

might be said of English prepositions, for example, that they govern objective case: *With him*, not **with he* (cf. Garrett 1986: 145). True, when a pronoun follows a preposition, the pronoun will have objective case. But before applying this generalization uncritically, teachers might wish to consider actual usage quite carefully. Prepositions in English do not absolutely require an overt object to be present in following position: *He's the one I was talking with*. According to Newmeyer (1999: 471-473), discourse-based functionalist accounts of such “preposition stranding” are “more adequate than purely formal [rule-based] ones” in terms of accounting for the linguistic facts. In terms of pedagogical advice, applying the f-rule that generates *with him* is not the only available choice. Moreover, the teacher should note that there are several words in English which are often labeled prepositions but which also occur with full clauses (i.e., as conjunctions) and so with subjective (nominative) case pronouns: *After, before, but, for, until* (and, colloquially, *like*). For such reasons, any teacher who is going to state an f-rule—even one as apparently simple as prepositional case in English—should do so only with great care.

Huffman (1997: 199-205) argues that even 100% correlations may be seen as communicatively motivated. The fact that two covarying linguistic forms are semantically compatible does not imply that one of them is semantically empty. He analyzes authentic examples of French verbs of ‘commanding’ or ‘ordering’ (with complement infinitive). *Prescrire* always occurs with dative (*lui/leur*), while *charger* and *sommer* always occur with accusative (*le/la/les*). Huffman demonstrates that not only the pronouns but also the verbs, independently, are distributed in texts in a semantically motivated way, having to do with what he terms Control and power relations among the referents. When verb and pronoun appear together in context, then, their collocation is the *result of* meaning, not at all a refutation of the role of meaning. Such demonstrations offer hope that even obstinate problems that resist

semantic treatment and so perpetuate a view of grammar as purely formal may one day yield to understanding and teaching in terms of communicative intent.

Rule in linguistics and in language teaching

So far, this article has taken for granted an intuitive understanding of the concepts *rule* and *meaning*. Because the field of language teaching has so often relied upon the field of linguistics for insights into the nature of language, we must examine *rule* and *meaning* in the literature of both fields. Our examination reveals, unfortunately, considerable confusion in regard to the application of both.

Teacher candidates will naturally tend to attach a strong prescriptive sense to the term *rule*, for indeed the term as ordinarily used is prescriptive. In the field of linguistics, a *rule* is not prescriptive but descriptive. A rule is “a formal statement of a correspondence between linguistic elements or structures” (Crystal 1985: 268). Rule has to do with linguistic form, not with speaker prestige. For example, in one variety of English (the standard), there is, one might claim, a formal *correspondence* between certain grammatical persons and numbers, on the one hand, and certain forms of the negative past tense of *be*, on the other:

I/he/she/it	↔	wasn't
we/you/they	↔	weren't

In another variety (that of many speakers in rural northeastern North Carolina), there is no such rule—or, a different rule: A single negative past form pronounced like *won't*:

I/he/she/it/we/you/they ↔ won't

The facts of both grammars can be stated as formal rules, regardless of the difference in the prestige of the forms in question.

In the field of SLA, it is not always clear whether or when the term *rule* is prescriptive or descriptive. On the one hand, descriptive rules can certainly be written for data that are not standard, such as for *interlanguage*, the output of learners, without necessarily judging such data or speakers negatively. On the other hand, even if rules are intended to be descriptive, when the variety of the language taught, the *target* language, is the standard variety, then it is hard to tell where description ends and prescription begins. Rules in pedagogical texts and in SLA literature often betray a prescriptive mindset: “The verb of a sentence must agree in number with its subject” (Smalley and Ruetten 1990: 447); or, “when using the verb *be*, English speakers need to use *am* for first person singular subjects and *are* for first person plural subjects” (Larsen-Freeman 2002: 104). Note the prescriptive words “must” and “need to.”

In classic formal linguistics, since Chomsky (1957: 17), a syntactic rule is “autonomous and independent of meaning.” Rules describe the structure, or *form*, or syntactic patterning of sentences, and that structure is assumed to exist independently of any communicative uses to which it might be put. The autonomy of syntax has been important in defining the great divide between formal and functional linguistics (cf. Newmeyer 1991: 3).

It is possible to conceive of linguistic rules in ways that are not autonomous of meaning. One could formulate descriptive statements of correspondence between form and semantic constructs, between form and discourse function, or between form and pragmatic usage. Any of the following might well enough be called rules: English verb *-s* means third-person singular

present tense; The phrase *there is* introduces a new discourse entity; or, French *tu* is the familiar form of address. As we shall see, *rule* in the applied linguistics literature, too, has various senses. Nevertheless, the formal syntactic rule has had a pervasive impact on the field of language teaching, and it is this sense of *rule* which, by definition, can contribute best to the present task of clarifying the status of rule and of meaning in grammar teaching.

English subject-verb agreement might well be the quintessential illustrative example of a formal autonomous syntactic rule (e.g. Anderson 1999: 113).⁷ Subject-verb agreement relates to the most fundamental elements of the sentence in English and it has often been used to illustrate the construct of the grammatical rule. To judge from the evidence of constructed sentences in isolation, the form of the verb (singular or plural) apparently contributes no independent semantic value but merely echoes that of the subject of its clause: That is, there is a formal *correspondence*, a correspondence in form, between the number of the verb and the number of the subject. The rule holds regardless of which meaning (singular or plural) is present.

That tree (sg.) bears (sg.) inedible fruit.

Those trees (pl.) bear (pl.) inedible fruit.

Apparently, verb -s is not independently meaningful.

Though current pedagogical approaches show a tendency to emphasize the role of meaning in language, the autonomous syntactic rule can nevertheless be found there. The general approach of Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) will illustrate.⁸ For some FFI writers, meaning is confined to the lexicon, and grammar is held to be essentially a formal structure, independent of meaning (Doughty and Williams 1998b: 244). VanPatten and Cadierno's (1993: 54) *input processing* is defined as "making form-meaning connections during comprehension,"

yet it also allows that second-language acquisition “is more than just input processing” and so includes the processing and analysis of “non-meaning bearing forms and structures,” that is, of “those items that carry no referential meaning.”

Also implying a separation of meaning (in lexis) and rule (in grammar) is R. Ellis (2002: 23). In discussing the teaching of grammar, he makes a contrast between “using lexis in context to make meaning” and “draw[ing] learners’ attention to the rule-governed nature of language.”

More problematic, the term *rule* is used as well to refer to what are in fact distinct types of linguistic phenomena, by no means limited to a syntax that is autonomous of meaning. Remarks by Larsen-Freeman (2002: 103-106) can illustrate. Though Larsen-Freeman rejects the view of grammar as a “linguistic straitjacket” and speaks of a “grammar of choice” and of meaning, and though she later (2003) will essentially abandon the construct of rule, here she retains a residue of rules for those few cases where “grammar relates to linguistic form, about which speakers have little choice.” She gives three examples.

First, “when using the verb *be*, English speakers need to use *am* for first person singular subjects and *are* for first person plural subjects”: *I am / we are*. Larsen-Freeman considers this an instance of the general fact that “the form of the verb . . . agrees with its subject.”

Larsen-Freeman’s second example of a rule is the fact that “*Children* is the irregular plural form of *child*.” This is an instance of the general problem of “the form of a plural common count noun.”

The third example of a rule given by Larsen-Freeman is English adjective-noun order, adjective coming before noun: *A fragrant meadow*, not * *a meadow fragrant*. Here, however, Larsen-Freeman goes on to observe that “Actually, it is in fact possible for attributive adjectives to follow a noun in English” (*That meadow fragrant with the smell of newly mown hay. . .*), and

she discusses the difference in meaning, which according to Bolinger (1967) has to do with the relative permanence of the attribute. So the rule is: One order for one meaning, another order for a different meaning.

It will easily be seen (Table 1) that these three rules are of quite different natures.

Table 1. Types of rules in SLA (Larsen-Freeman 2002)

Rule	Dimension	Linguistic type	Orientation
<i>I am / we are</i>	syntagmatic	syntactic	language-internal
<i>child / children</i>	paradigmatic	morphological	language-internal
<i>fragrant ~ meadow</i>	syntagmatic	semantic	language-external

The rule for *I am / we are* and the rule for *fragrant meadow / meadow fragrant* are syntagmatic in that they apply to elements within a sentence; they operate in a horizontal dimension, as it were. The rule for *child / children* is entirely orthogonal to those. It is paradigmatic in that it applies to a given element and an alternative element; it operates in a vertical dimension.

The rules also differ in their linguistic type, or the branch of linguistics to which they relate. The rule for subject-verb agreement is *syntactic* in that it describes a formal correspondence between elements in a sentence, independent of meaning. According to the rule, verbs formally agree with subjects regardless of whether they are singular or plural, first-, second-, or third-person. Given *I*, the corresponding *am* is not independently meaningful, does not make its own semantic contribution but instead merely mirrors the fact that *I* is first-person singular. The rule for *child / children* is of a different linguistic type. It is *morphological* in that it describes the various forms the lexical item CHILD may take—*child* for singular and *children*

for plural. Like the first rule, this one is also not semantic.⁹ Larsen-Freeman's third rule, for *fragrant meadow / meadow fragrant*, is semantic.

The third rule also has a language-external orientation; it makes reference to something outside language. The first two rules refer to language-internal facts: Subjects and verbs agree; lexical items have various forms. But the semantic rule for *fragrant meadow / meadow fragrant* makes reference to the relative permanence of the fragrance of the meadow, a condition outside language proper.

White (1998: 86) goes so far as to consider the marking of natural gender (*his / her*) as an instance of a rule. Like Larsen-Freeman's third rule, this one is semantic and language-external. But it differs from the *fragrant meadow* in that it is objectively referential rather than subjective on the part of the speaker; it is truly referential.

Clearly, the concept of *rule* covers a lot of ground. Extensions of the concept of *rule* into the realm of semantics prompt the observation that *rule* and *meaning* are not kept distinct in SLA but are confounded. This is bound to be problematic for the teacher who is no expert in linguistic theory and who is looking for something firm to grasp onto. As Strauss, Lee, and Ahn (2006: 186) note, rules that are not purely syntactic may be “fuzzy, if determined at all.”

Indeed, it may be that the lack of consensus on the definition of *rule* has contributed to the persistence of the use of the term. A rule in SLA can be any kind of pattern, even only a statistical tendency. Strauss, Lee, and Ahn (2006) adopt the model of a “conceptual grammar,” which employs symbolic (i.e. meaningful) structures, not morphosyntactic rules. Thus in conceptual grammar, “the traditional concept of *rule* is [N.B.] replaced by the notion of conceptualization patternings,” which are symbolic, fluid, dynamic, and discourse-sensitive (p. 186). Nevertheless, the same writers take as their research question (p. 187) “what types of

rules” learners can infer and formulate, and they conclude (p. 203) that “conceptual grammar enables linguists, teachers, and learners to formulate new rules” derived from “meaning and usage in discourse.” Thus the construct of *rule* is not only not replaced but rather is expansively broadened.

It would be possible, then, but counterproductive to retain the notion of *rule* for the relations between form and communicative considerations such as seen in the examples early in this paper (e.g., *heaven and hell is/are*). Uses of the term are just too wide-ranging, even while it keeps us tethered to a view of grammar as fundamentally autonomous of meaning, a view with limited currency, as noted above.

Meaning in language teaching and in linguistics

Meaning is almost as problematic as *rule*. In the field of language teaching, the term *meaning* has often been used almost synonymously with *communication* in the abstract, as in a “focus on meaning” in a classroom, to the exclusion of a “focus on form.” Doughty and Williams (1998a: 3-4), while noting terminological confusion, pick up this widespread usage. In this most non-technical sense, *meaning* is not tied to any particular form but is a kind of *gestalt* resulting from language use in context.

Systemic functional linguistics (Halliday 2004) advisedly uses the term *meaning* in an essentially non-technical “everyday” sense (Mohan and Beckett 2003: 425). SFL “is oriented to the description of language as *a resource for meaning* rather than as a system of rules” (Mohan and Beckett 2003: 423, their emphasis). A grammatical system (e.g. positive / negative polarity of a clause) “represents an aspect of the *meaning potential* of the language,” and only some

meanings are “grammaticalized” (Halliday 2004: 22, 46, his emphasis). So *meaning* is the content of communication, only some of which is tied to grammatical form.

VanPatten, Williams, and Rott (2004: 2-3) summarize four somewhat more technical senses of the term *meaning*. *Pragmatic meaning* is an inference involving the interaction among speakers which derives from the use of a given sentence in a given situation: *Why don't you take a break? = I'm telling you you should take a break.* *Sociolinguistic meaning* is an inference about social relations among speakers and may derive from a single word: French polite *vous* instead of familiar *tu* for singular addressee. At the more technical end of the spectrum is *referential meaning*, which is typically tied to a particular linguistic form, and which VanPatten, Williams, and Rott divide into two types: Concrete (Eng. *cat* = a four-legged feline) and abstract (Sp. *-aba-* = nonpunctual). Referential meaning includes “number, temporal reference, agency, aspect, and lexical reference.”

Referential meaning is the sense of *meaning* that is most relevant to our purpose here. This is the sense that figures in the view of grammar as form-meaning connection: A “situation in which a form encodes some kind of referential meaning” (VanPatten, William, and Rott 2004: 3).¹⁰ It thus lends itself well to an approach to teaching in which communication is paramount and grammar is taken to be part of that communication. All of the forms mentioned by Larsen-Freeman (2002) above can be said to encode (abstract) referential meaning: *Am* (first-person singular), *children* (plural), *meadow fragrant* (temporary). In view of the rules cited above, then, it is evident that *rule* and *meaning* will hardly be kept conceptually distinct in FFI.

Researchers do in fact use both terms in the same context without necessarily distinguishing them.¹¹ Doughty and Williams (1998b) illustrate a deliberate overlap of *form* and *rule*, which are then, we shall see, confounded too with *meaning*:

In our discussion . . . , the terms *form* and *rule* are both used, since learners are engaged in acquiring both. That is to say, SLA is essentially a process of working out the entire system of the L2, a system that is composed of interrelated forms. Put simply, rules describe the realization, distribution, and use of forms. Thus, for us, both forms and rules are subsumed by the more comprehensive term *form*. (1998b: 211)

But, in addition to the *gestalt* sense of *meaning* seen above, Doughty and Williams (1998b: 244-245) adopt also a more technical, form-bound definition of *meaning*. They label *meaning* anything that is lexical (*comfortable, uncomfortable*) but only certain things that might be considered grammatical; for example, agent and theme in a passive construction are instances of meaning. Meanwhile, *function* for these writers is something in a sense larger. Function involves extra-sentential discourse-related guidance for use: Use the passive when the agent is unknown: *My wallet was stolen*.

What is not quite clear is the relationship between *rule* and *meaning* for these writers. Is grammatical meaning (e.g. agent / theme) something ancillary to grammar, a kind of side effect? Or, as seems more likely, does meaning have something crucial to do with the “realization, distribution, and use of forms”? Surely that is the case with lexical meaning. So presumably it is the case for grammatical meaning too: Put the theme of a passive construction before the verb; put the agent in a *by*-phrase. If meaning as such determines the distribution of forms, then meaning is rule by Doughty and Williams’s definition of *rule*. And, moreover, since rule is for them subsumed under form, it follows that meaning is form. Meaning is rule is form.

Linguistics offers another conceptualization of *meaning*, one that has not received adequate attention in the language-teaching literature. In this conceptualization, the meaning of a linguistic form (or *linguistic sign* or *signal*) is not referential to the world nor is it even a “compositional” (fractional) part of the overall message communicated. Rather, linguistic meaning in this sense is “instrumental,” providing merely a “contribution” to a holistic message, the vast remainder of which is not encoded at all but inferred from context, experience, and so forth (Contini-Morava 1995: 5-6, Huffman 1997: 16-19). In this view, the Columbia School view, the whole in language use is far greater than the sum of the linguistic parts.

A “form-meaning connection” (alternatively, “form-meaning pair,” “symbolic structure,” “linguistic sign,” or “linguistic signal”) that encodes such a linguistic meaning is essentially some version of Saussure’s (1915 [1972]) *signe linguistique*, comprised of a (usually minimal) form (*signifiant*) with a semantic content (*signifié*). Many modern schools of linguistics employ some such device. In that vein, Columbia School linguists posit hypotheses about grammatical forms (morphemes and orders of morphemes) and what the semantic content of these forms might be. Particularly for the Columbia School linguist, the hypothesis for the semantic content of a signal—its *meaning*—will typically be sparse and constant, with much of the speaker’s communicative intent in a piece of discourse—its overall *message*—resulting from an interaction between linguistic and extra-linguistic factors.

For example, Reid’s (1991) linguistic signal *-s* bears the Number meaning MORE THAN ONE, and an opposed signal *-∅* bears the meaning ONE. These meanings might *contribute* to an interpretation of mass reference or count reference, but this will depend on other things in the linguistic context—most directly, but not exclusively, on the lexical items to which they are attached—and on various aspects of the situation in which the forms are used. So in general

boy-Ø is likely to receive a count interpretation, while *soy-Ø* is likely to receive a mass interpretation, but “count” and “mass” are not *meanings* encoded in the signal -Ø. Rather, the meaning ONE (by virtue of having to do with Number) merely *contributes* to a certain interpretation in a certain context. The wider linguistic context is relevant to the interpretation. *Much boy-Ø*, as opposed to *that boy-Ø*, is especially likely to receive a mass interpretation: *There’s too much boy in that boy*. And then a fully adequate interpretation will also require familiarity with situationally relevant cultural norms, involving in this case stereotypically masculine behavior by young males.

Form-meaning connection (FMC)

In the early 1980s, Terrell spoke of the acquisition of rules (Terrell 1982, Krashen and Terrell 1983) and conceived on language instruction in those terms. Later, Terrell (1991) changed his position: “My hypothesis is that what must be perceived and stored in the acquisition process are the individual meaning-form pairs, *not* a grammatical rule” (p. 57, emphasis added).

In their view that language acquisition has to do with FMCs and not with rules, Terrell (1991) and Larsen-Freeman (2003) and others can call upon support from linguistic and psycholinguistic theory. The idea of a unit involving both form and meaning is well established in linguistics. The *signe linguistique* is the foundation of the functionalist schools cited above. Particularly with the growth of usage-based emergent grammar, the form-meaning connection has gained momentum in SLA (Bybee 1985 influenced Terrell 1991: 62 n. 4). Its acceptance also owes much to research on language learning and memory (summarized in Larsen-Freeman 2003: 79-91). Indeed, as noted by Larsen-Freeman (2004: 237), various linguistic theories have

contributed to research on form-meaning connection in SLA: Generative linguistics (Klein 2004), cognitive linguistics (Cadierno and Lund 2004), and construction grammar (N.C. Ellis 2004).

The concept of the FMC will ultimately be persuasive, however, only if Saussure's oft-neglected tenet is kept in mind: Meaning in language is not restricted to the referential (Otheguy 2002). Certainly, meaning cannot be identical with reference: *Your mother is my sister. Mother* and *sister* have the same reference in this instance, but it would be absurd to say that in the lexicon the items *mother* and *sister* have the same meaning. Rather, precisely because they have different meanings, a speaker is able to use them to communicate two distinct points of view concerning the referent: The speaker's own point of view and the addressee's point of view.

Meaning can involve subjective commentary:

Do you want more ice cream? I do. Let's have some!

Did you want more ice cream? Or have you had enough? I have.

The *scenes* being referred to by *Do you want* and *Did you want* could well be the same—perhaps a dinner host offering a guest seconds on dessert. But in the second case, by choosing *did* (with its past or subjunctive meaning) in relation to such a scene, the speaker conveys a *message* that suggests a sort of distance, and this could provide a hint that he thinks the addressee ought not want more ice cream: *Maybe at one point you did want more, but surely you have changed your mind; or, If you did want more now, that would be unreasonable of you.*¹²

And meaning can serve as an aid in processing:

I said I'd come back.

I promised all those assembled *that*, no matter what, I would return at the appointed hour.

Deictic *that* can serve to heighten attention to the processing of a more difficult subordinate clause.

A full account of the distribution of linguistic forms which attempts to relate them to linguistic meanings will thus need to include non-referential instrumental meaning, meaning which aids communication without necessarily pointing to external reality.

The inadequacy of rules for SLA

Learners seek certainty, and f-rules appear to provide it. Of course, Krashen and Terrell (1983) argue against their explicit instruction, proposing that the teaching of rules raises an affective barrier to their unconscious acquisition. But there is another reason not to teach f-rules: They rarely if ever accurately describe actual usage. This can be illustrated with Larsen-Freeman's (2002: 104-106) three rules, above. Keep in mind that, for Larsen-Freeman, grammar is largely about meaning, not rules, and so her rules, a "very minimal set," might well be expected to be truly necessary.

For adjective-noun order, the concept of *rule* was invoked to describe the evident correlation between word order and meaning: Adjective-noun for a more permanent attribute, noun-adjective for a more temporary attribute. To call this a rule in fact subverts Larsen-Freeman's own distinction between rules and meaning, where meaning involves the speaker's choice and rules exclude choice. With adjective-noun order, speakers clearly have a choice, depending on what they wish to communicate:

I like my *fragrant meadow*. I don't like my smelly pasture.

I like my *meadow fragrant*. I think I'll mow it.

If rules are intended to supplement a “grammar of choice,” then this rule isn't a rule.

The paradigmatic alternation of *child / children* applies to one word in one language. If this alternation is a rule, it has zero generality.

I am / we are. The rule describing the covariation between the number and person of the subject and the form of ‘be’ ignores the choice between indicative and subjunctive:

They insist that I am friendly.

They insist that we are friendly.

They insist that I be friendly.

They insist that we be friendly.

This choice of indicative or subjunctive is within the spirit of Larsen-Freeman's chapter, where “grammatical knowledge consists of knowing when to use the forms to convey meanings that match our intentions in particular contexts” (p. 105). So far as rules go, then, we are left with just the observation that, among indicatives at least, *I* goes with *am* and *we* goes with *are*. Yet that correlation is already accounted for if, taking an FMC approach, we posit that part of the meaning of *am* is ONE, and part of the meaning of *are* is MORE THAN ONE: *I are* and *we am* would be semantically incoherent.¹³

In more recent work, Larsen-Freeman (2003) takes the position that rules are merely the artifacts of communicative considerations.¹⁴ For her, “the acquisition of grammar [is] different from the acquisition and application of rules” (p. 113). Rules now appear to be, ultimately, nothing more than “rules of thumb” (p. 150), admittedly imperfect generalizations which may

give learners some sense of security. What is really going on in grammar is “visible or audible units” of “form” with “encoded” “meaning” and pragmatic (social and discourse-level) “use” (pp. 34-35). “A difference in form always spells a difference in meaning or use” (p. 44). How, then, does meaning relate to rules? Linguistic “meaning” and contextual “use” furnish the “reasons” for the rules. That is, rules are nothing more than artifacts of communicative considerations.

This understanding of the nature of language might profitably be reformulated in a way that avoids as much as possible the more compromised terminology of our field, especially the most compromised term, *rule*: What we have always called *grammar* is actually, like the lexicon, composed of perceptible units that encode semantic content. Not only descriptive reference but also social and discourse considerations factor into a speaker’s choice of a meaningful grammatical form. The ordinary need to render discourse both appropriate and coherent results in the fact of correlations among linguistic forms. Some of these correlations may approach or even reach one hundred percent, but they are always merely effects, not causes. What speakers actually operate with, in all cases, are meaningful forms in context.

Towards a pedagogy based on meaning, not rules

The possibility of a pedagogy that eschews formal rules of grammar altogether—even as a behind-the-scenes theoretical support—and relies instead entirely upon meaning seems to have kept largely off the proverbial radar screen.¹⁵ The possibility is not mentioned in Norris and Ortega’s (2000) comprehensive meta-analysis. They categorize pedagogical treatments in terms of “whether or not *rule explanation* or related attention to the *rule-governed nature* of L2 structures was incorporated into the treatment (explicit versus implicit instruction)” (p. 482,

emphasis added). They do conclude (pp. 500-501), however, that “focused L2 instruction results in large gains” compared to a control group, that the effects “seem durable,” that explicit techniques are “more effective” than implicit ones, and that a focus on individual *forms* is as effective as attention to holistic *form*. That is, some explicit attention to at least the fact that language *has form* is very helpful.

To talk explicitly in the classroom about form-meaning connections, not f-rules, as the driving force behind the use of linguistic forms in a communicative context would go one step beyond FFI. In FFI, activities may or may not get explicit about individual *forms*. If they do get explicit, we have Focus-on-*Forms* (FonFs), techniques that are to date somewhat suspect out of fear of reversion to outmoded grammar-translation methodology. If activities do not get explicit about forms, we have the more widely accepted, holistic Focus-on-*Form* (FonF). To talk explicitly about *meanings* and *forms*—FMCs—would go beyond what Jean (2005), in line with Norris and Ortega (2000), recommends, viz. engaging in activities that require learners to pay attention to essentially unanalyzed form and meaning (i.e. broad communicative effect) at the same time. The new approach would remain communicative; it would retain consciousness-raising activities; and consistent with some FFI practice, it would be explicit about form. But it would also, on occasion at least, get explicit about the FMCs. It would at last give teachers and learners “something to hold onto” (Larsen-Freeman 2003: 14), but that would be a meaningful form, not a rule. Such an approach might be called a Focus on Form and Meaning (FFM).¹⁶

Columbia School grammar, represented by Reid (1991) above, is also free of rules and has focused much of its work specifically on identifying the meanings of particular forms.¹⁷ It might well inform an FFM approach. Miller (1996), following Reid (1991), has recommended that learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) be made aware of the communicative

consequences of the choice of *-s* or *-Ø* on nouns. Particularly, learners need to understand that, in English, *-Ø* is meaningful, and so *Their name are Juan and Rosa* is problematic for native speakers, notwithstanding the possibility of an interpretation in line with the speaker's intent. *Their name* leads a listener or reader to expect a continuation such as *is Ortiz*. When that expectation is not met, processing adjustments must be made on the spot, and communication is impaired.

One can readily imagine adapting lessons on Number to various age and proficiency levels. Cohen (2003), a teacher in a graduate-level English grammar course, developed an ESL lesson for first-graders built around children's books about mismatched socks and mittens.

Taking an FFM approach, a teacher-education class on the structure of the target language might include activities such as the following, for each grammatical topic:

- A review of the traditional rule- and sentence-based treatment, with attention to its strengths and its shortcomings, illustrated with authentic examples;
- An instructor-led analysis of selected authentic examples in discourse to illustrate the communicative impact of the selection of contrasting forms (*Heaven and hell is/are; I am/be*);
- A brief presentation of the grammatical system of forms and meanings;
- Collaborative inquiry on a selected passage of discourse, to see how a skilled writer's choices contribute to create an effective, coherent message;
- Collaborative analysis of (advanced) learner output, pinpointing communicative consequences of infelicitous choices and suggesting revision;
- Discussion of potential pedagogical strategies suitable for the grammatical point and for teachers' various target populations;

- An assignment to find and analyze, for subsequent discussion, authentic examples illustrating effective choice of forms and meanings of the system, with explanation geared towards fellow teachers or towards learners.

Authentic text can be quite effective in revealing the inadequacy of traditional treatment. Take something as deceptively simple as noun Number. Regarding the old count-mass noun distinction, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: 27) acknowledge, “Actually, nouns have more flexibility in number than this traditional distinction reveals.” Using published texts for the general public, teachers in my class have encountered and analyzed, among many other counterexamples to the distinction, *an entertainment*, *forty linear feet of bench*, and *musics*. (See Celce-Murcia (2002: 122-131) on the use of contextual analysis in teacher education.)

Until meaning-based analyses of actual grammatical forms are widely available and assembled into practical reference works, instructors on their own can work to become more sensitive to patterns of usage in actual discourse and can involve learners too in gaining insights. This requires a change of mindset and a bit of prep work. For example, anyone who will look can fairly easily notice that in English the objective case of pronouns has a wider distribution than the subjective case, which is pretty much limited to being subject of a finite verb.

Oh! *Him* again!

Let’s talk with *him* about it.

Yes, I met *him* already.

Yes, *he* met me already.

Absent a fully validated analysis of the difference in meaning between *he* and *him*, teacher-educators, using authentic text, might at least point out the distributional pattern and talk about it

in a meaningful way. One might say: *I, we, he, she, they* mean that you're talking about the person as being the main participant in some particular event, what we sometimes call the subject of the verb. *Me, us, him, her, them* mean that you're referring to the person in some other way, not as the main participant in an event; either there is no verb, or someone else is more in focus in that event. It is an easy and interesting task, using texts with a main character, to show that the character most in focus in a narrative tends overwhelmingly to get subjective case. This way, even if the teacher opts to state a rule (prepositions take objective case), at least the grammar point has been made part of an overall meaning-based approach. Teachers, and eventually learners, at least sense that there is meaning behind the rule, rather than despairing that everything is "arbitrary" (Larsen-Freeman 2003: 52).

Conclusion

This article has illustrated the meaningful nature of grammar even in situations that appear to be simple examples of f-rules; pointed out widespread confusion in the SLA literature in the usage of the terms *rule, meaning, and form*; argued that this confusion contributes to the survival of a mindset in which grammar is seen as arbitrary; and recommended pedagogical activities that reflect an approach involving a Focus on Form and Meaning rather than on unanalyzed form alone or unanalyzed communication alone.

Many researchers and teachers have lately moved increasingly away from a reliance upon the construct of the *rule* in favor of the meaning-bearing *signal* or form-meaning connection. Yet the field has shied away from endorsing explicit classroom treatment—instruction, inquiry, or whatnot—of the meanings of particular grammatical forms. These constructs might provide something concrete to replace rules referring to properties of form if only the linguistic analyses

that support them were not so heterodox, far-flung, and inaccessible to practitioners. Until that situation is remedied, research can focus on what teachers and teacher-educators can do to sensitize themselves to the patterns that forms exhibit in discourse and to the effects that different forms have on a communication in context. At its most conservative, this would entail nothing more than an instructor who is already doing some form-focused instruction having students investigate and begin to articulate what contributions various grammatical forms appear to be making to successful communication in the target variety of the language.

¹ *Dan's Papers*, 26 August 2005, Bridgehampton, N.Y.: 47, 51.

² Truly irregular lexemes like *man / men*, *child / children*, can be said to encode Number by suppletion instead of the signals in Figure 1.

³ These examples are from the 10 September 2001 issue of *The New Yorker*.

⁴ To illustrate: *What is your name? What are your names? Which is the best way? Which are the best students? I know the one who really matters. I know the ones who really matter. One liter is not enough; more is needed. Two computers is not enough; more are needed. Most of the chocolate is gone. Most of the guests are gone. Some of the chocolate is gone. Some of the guests are gone. Is any of the chocolate left? Are any of the guests still here? All of the chocolate is gone. All of the guests are gone. Of the two proposals, mine is better than yours. Among our friends, mine are more reliable than yours.*

⁵ It would not do to say that the phrase *the number of* takes a singular verb and the phrase *a number of* takes a plural verb. Consider: *In making an essay assignment, a number of pages has to be specified.*

⁶ Thanks to Wallis Reid (p.c. 2004) for this formulation.

⁷ The original (Chomsky 1957: 39) formulation of this rule is a bit too complex to present here; actually, it was two rules. It involved the obligatory insertion of a verbal *s* in the formal context of a preceding singular NP, and the moving of that *s* onto the end of the V of the VP.

⁸ This article adopts Spada's (1997) term, *form-focused instruction* (FFI), so as to be inclusive of recent approaches regardless whether or not they limit themselves to instruction that is reactive and unobtrusive. Thus, these remarks include, but are not limited to, "focus-on-form." There is no intention to minimize the importance of the debate between proponents and opponents of proactive, obtrusive instruction; the thesis of this article applies to both to the extent that they are unclear on the question of the rule-governed versus the meaning-based nature of grammar.

⁹ The two terms *singular* and *plural* appear to be semantic but in principle the names for morphological forms do not necessarily equate with the *meanings* of the forms (i.e. ONE, MORE). They are, technically, merely labels for forms. Think of the names of the cases (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, ablative).

¹⁰ For recent work in form-meaning connection, see VanPatten, Williams, and Rott (eds.) (2004).

¹¹ To illustrate, see Doughty and Williams eds. (1998). Long and Robinson: "knowledge of a rule" and "form-function mapping" (p. 17). DeKeyser: "the statement of the rule" and "form-function relationship" (p. 44). Swain: "a set of rules relevant to the grammatical point in focus" (p. 73) and "make the verb agree" (p. 74), but also "the critical links between meaning, forms, and function" (p. 69, also p. 80). Williams and Evans: "attention was drawn to form, meaning, and use, and . . . rules" (p. 142).

¹² See Diver (1995: 74) for this usage of the term referential *scene* as distinct from encoded *meaning* and inferred *message*.

¹³ This observation does not pretend to constitute a full semantic analysis of the forms of *be*. In particular, the use of *are* with *you* for singular reference, and the phrase *aren't I?* argue against a simple assignment of the meaning MORE THAN ONE to that form.

¹⁴ The quotation marks that follow are not derogatory scare-quotes but indications of a careful usage of Larsen-Freeman's terms, in line with the goal of clarification of terms and concepts.

¹⁵ Garrett (1986: 145-146) called for "a radical reformulation of our notion of grammar and of the operation of grammatical concepts in the development of our students' proficiency," but she would replace the generative syntactic rules of that era with psycholinguistic processing rules.

¹⁶ "Form and Meaning" rather than "Forms and Meanings" because the latter might risk implying a scattershot coverage of unrelated FMCs instead of a coherent coverage of the forms and meanings that together constitute grammatical systems as in Figures 1 and 2.

¹⁷ In addition to Reid (1991) on English verb and noun Number (with brief treatments too of *do*, question inversion, and the articles), other available Columbia School (CS) grammatical analyses include Huffman (2002) on English subject-verb order, Stern (2006) on English *-self* pronouns, Huffman (1997) on French clitic pronouns, Davis (2002) on Italian disjunctive pronouns, Gorup (2002) on Serbo-Croatian demonstratives and (2006) on reflexive/impersonal *se*, and Goldberg (1995) and de Jonge (2004) on the Spanish subjunctive. CS analyses of English lexicon include Crupi (2006) and Reid (2004). A study of the unaided acquisition of English articles from a CS point of view is Gorokhova (1995). Other signal-meaning analyses, including other languages and other theoretical perspectives such as Cognitive Grammar and Guillaumean linguistics, can be found in the volumes in which those articles appear and in Contini-Morava and Tobin (eds.) (2000).

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