

Grammar as social drama

A performance-driven approach based on core linguistic principles

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Speech production is both a physical activity and a social performance. Grammar is an integral part of this process and should therefore be taught using embodied and interactional strategies. Grammar cannot be reduced to its formal elements and treated merely as a set of “rules”, “tools” and “constructions”. Posture, movement and vocal inflection play a significant role in expressing the grammatical meanings and functions that support communicative interaction. Grammar is the backbone of “(il)locutionary acts” (Austin, 1962) and the prime carrier of “locutionary subjectivity” (Lyons, 1995). In this article, we outline strategies for emphasising the dramatic, emotional and interpersonal dimensions of grammar. As learners engage with the proposed materials and activities, they discover how grammar operates socially and physically, and how it expresses the speaker’s subjective stance. They enact grammar-driven processes with presence, fluidity, and emotional engagement, absorbing and de-alienating a “foreign” system of coding and expression.

Keywords: Grammar ; embodiment ; speech acts ; subjectivity ; social interaction.

1 Introduction

We are embodied social beings: breathing, feeling, and moving creatures who connect with fellow humans in “routinized social settings” (Goffman, 1967, p. 2). We are endowed with thought and consciousness, intentionality and the ability to situate ourselves in space and time. Our cognitive development, from childhood to adulthood, is crucially dependent on our interactions with the socio-physical world we inhabit—a world that imposes language as a key mediator between the self and others, experience and knowledge (Vygotsky, 1986). Language acts both as the “mirror” (reflector) and the “shaper” (instrument) of human cognition (Heine, 1997, p. 16). It provides us with the semiotic tools we need to think, feel, construe, categorize, connect and share our experience of the world in “patterned” (preordained) ways (Whorf, 2000, p. 66).

Language is also an instrument of rationalization. It helps us draw abstractions, generalisations and “schematic structure” from our concrete physical interactions with the world (Johnson, 1990, p. 18). It is instrumental in helping us form, manipulate and interpret symbols and

images (Piaget, 1970), allowing us to “focus and shift our attention”, to “compare” different things, to “establish correspondences”, to “view a scene from different perspectives” (Langacker, 2008, p. 8). Language also allows us to produce narrative accounts of actions, situations and events (Bruner, 2004; MacIntyre, 2007), combining different functions—presentative, interpretive, argumentative, descriptive, and more. The forms of discourse used can be factual, distanced and detached, just as they can carry “affect” and “emotional intensity” (Lacheret-Dujour & Desagulier, 2023).

Finally, language is instrumental in enabling us to engage in highly ritualized “performance genres” (Schechner, 2003, p. 11): greetings and partings, family meals, celebrations, lessons, professional meetings, commercial transactions, (sports) games, (artistic) performances, etc. This is an inescapable anthropological fact that should always be borne in mind when designing courses and pedagogical scenarios. But is that always so? How much thought and attention do we actually give to space, time, embodiment, narrativity, perspective, performativity and social connectedness in our educational praxis? Assuming that we do, is grammar part of the picture?

Interlude 1 – “Doing language and grammar”: How story-telling, mental imagery, perspectivization, emotion and grammar can be shown to work together¹

Copies of the last page of *Jacob's Room* (Woolf, 1922) are handed out. In Woolf's first experimental novel, the revelation of Jacob's death is abrupt and comes as a complete shock to the reader, who is left to infer that Jacob volunteered to fight and was subsequently killed in action. His mother, Mrs Flanders, has come to clear out his flat with the help of Jacob's best friend, Bonamy, whom we suspect had a platonic crush on the young man.

The students first close their eyes and travel back in time. They visualize mother and friend coming up the stairs and walking into Jacob's “rooms” in London. They “see” the thick curtains and the high ceilings. Their eyes rest on Jacob's things lying about. They observe Bonamy as he walks over to the window, while Mrs Flanders remains standing in the doorway, looking at the bills and letters spread over the table. They hear the floorboards creak and the sounds of the busy street outside. They detect various smells floating around. Drawing on “visual, (...) auditory and motor imagery” (Kosslyn, 2001), they experience the characters' sensations and mood shifts. They alternate between first- and third-person perspectives, internal and external

¹ “The Choreography of Speech” workshops, Master's program in English Studies, U-Bordeaux Montaigne (2020, 2021).

focalization. They travel back further to witness the explosion and carnage during the fatal battle. Finally, they come back to the present. Opening their eyes again, they reflect on their mental journey, on the role of sensory imagery in the “creation of an illusion,” on how much they were “caught up” and “engrossed” in the phenomenological process (O’Neill, 1985, p. 160).

They reflect on the power of storytelling, considering how a short narrative can connect, integrate, and compress multiple events –told and untold– into a single, coherent whole. For example, Jacob enlisting, packing, doing his basic training, being sent to the front and killed; Mrs Flanders turning to Bonamy for help; the pair meeting up in London, etc. They also consider how THEMATIC ROLES are cast among “doers”, “actors”, “acolytes”, “antagonists”, “beneficiaries”, and “victims”, with possible shifts in agency. For example, Jacob is both the VOLITIONAL AGENT who makes the decision to go to war and the PATIENT/VICTIM who dies in battle, while Bonamy is the INSTRUMENT chosen by Mrs Flanders to perform a very painful deed.

They reflect on the “grammar of story-telling”, which typically requires agents, actions, goals, settings, instruments, and the unexpected occurrence of “trouble” to dramatize human experience (Burke, 1945; Bruner, 2004). Finally, they perform together an abridged version (or “vignette”) of the scene, in oratorio mode. They use the script below as their “score” and develop successive variations *da capo*.

Mother (Mrs. Flanders)

(Looking around, her eyes resting on imaginary objects and pieces of furniture)

He left everything just as it was.

The bills, and the letters... for everyone to read.

Bonamy

(Accusingly)

What did he expect?

Did he think he would come back?

Mother

(Thinking of the mess left by Jacob and the turmoil outside)

Such confusion everywhere!

Bonamy

Jacob! Jacob!

Additional remarks are made for students training to become EFL teachers. Grammatical constructions, not just “words”, play a part in expressing feelings and attitudes. Thus, Mrs Flanders uses the SIMPLE PAST² (“*He left everything just as it was*”), followed by two COORDINATED NOUNS (“*the bills and the letters*”), and a CLAUSE OF RESULT / PURPOSE (“*for everyone to read*”) to report her son’s actions. Her attitude is dignified, her tone factual and descriptive—or “constative” at first (Austin, 1962, p. 3). However, her apparent poise is short-lived: the inherent subjectivity of DEGREE EXPRESSIONS, combined with the expressive properties of VERBLESS CONSTRUCTIONS and EXCLAMATIONS (“*Such confusion everywhere!*”) eventually convey her misery. Bonamy’s handling of syntax is less subtle. From the outset, he makes it clear that he is angry with Jacob for making the unwise decision to enlist. He uses QUESTIONS scathingly to convey his anger and frustration (“*What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?*”). Although INTERROGATIVE in form, the QUESTIONS are not “information-seeking”. They function as STRONG ASSERTIONS, bitter accusations of naivety and irresponsibility (“*Jacob shouldn’t have gone! How utterly foolish and irresponsible of him!*”). They should therefore be delivered with desperation, as EXCLAMATIONS.

2 Performance-based scenarios are legitimate and must be taken seriously

The performance-based “scenarios” that our community promotes in language education are neither fanciful nor gimmicky: they have a solid semiotic, anthropological and phenomenological basis. They acknowledge the primacy of sensorimotor experience, consciousness and situatedness in understanding (Merleau-Ponty, 2000 [1945]). They give their rightful place to “story”, “projection” and “narrative imagining” in meaning-making (Turner, 1996, p. 5). They explore the expressive potential of vocal-gestural expression in language and bodily engagement in “articulatory behaviour” (Birdwhistell, 1970, p. 120). They make learners “psychophysically malleable” by training them to re-enact real-life situations from lived memory, while encouraging them to open up “realms of simulation, feigning, pretending, playing around with” (Schechner, 2003, pp. 321-22). They promote higher states of “presence” (Piazzoli, 2018, p. 24), body awareness and phenomenal consciousness. They encourage a deeper and more complete exploration of time and space. They put a magnifying glass on the psychological and socio-interactional processes that define the human condition.

² Small capitals are used in this article to code grammatical markers, categories and processes.

Interlude 2 – “Doing language and grammar”: Talking to yourself and voicing feelings of powerlessness³



Figure 1 – *Performing Sleep* (Churchill, 2013)

I can't sleep... Hot milk... I hate it now.

Book? I haven't got one I like.

Just lie there and breathe

My head's too full of stuff.

In this short scene, grammatical form is given to a state of confusion and agitation. Using a NEGATIVE MODAL CONSTRUCTION to express inability and distress (“*I can't sleep*”) is a useful reminder that grammar endows speakers with “locutionary agency” (Lyons, 1995, p. 293)—the capacity to feel and say, the power to articulate experience and package information through the medium of utterances. The performative format adopted in this exercise is also a reminder that grammar should not be reduced to an abstract system of symbols, rules and patterns. Grammar is embodied. Grammar carries emotion. Grammar is an instrument of “locutionary subjectivity” (Lyons, 1995, p. 337).⁴ Grammar is not reducible to “tools” – also known as “grams”, “markers”, “morphemes”—and “constructions.” Grammar involves posture, movement, and vocal inflection. The grammatical expression of affect also manifest itself in the use of VERBLESS UTTERANCES (“*Hot milk*”), ELLIPTICAL CONSTRUCTIONS (“*Book?*”), short DECLARATIVE SENTENCES (“*I can't sleep. I hate it*”), and QUANTIFIERS / INTENSIFIERS (“*too full of stuff*”). It is interesting to note that

³ “English in performance” classes, Master’s program in drama, U-Bordeaux Montaigne, 2022-24.

⁴ In his overview of the “subjectivity of utterance”, “agency” and “consciousness” Lyons (1995, pp. 293-346) gives two definitions of “locutionary subjectivity”: one short, “self-expression in the use of language” (p. 340) and one long, “the locutionary agent's (the speaker's or writer's, the utterer's) expression of himself or herself in the act of utterance: locutionary subjectivity is, quite simply, self-expression in the use of language” (p. 337).

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using BARE SUBSTANTIVES (or ARTICLE-LESS NOUNS) like *milk* or *book* does indeed “lay bare” their meaning. Their raw expressive potential is abruptly released. VERBLESS CONSTRUCTIONS function in a similar way: they reduce a statement to “bare essentials” and strengthen the pragmatic impact of the message “(Should I drink) hot milk? (Or should I read a) book?” Adapted from *Sleep in Love and Information* (Churchill, 2013).

Re-enacting social situations vocally and kinetically is consistent with the performative nature of speech. Drama brings out the inbuilt theatricality of human communicative behaviour. The multimodality, expressivity and social dynamics of grammar are part of the performance. Learning about the performative quality of grammar can empower learners. Enacting situations where grammar sustains dramatic action will make grammar attractive to them and embolden them. Exploring the relationship between “grammar and life” (Langacker, 2008, p. 3) through vocal-gestural exercises and stylistic variations is always eye-opening and rewarding. Conversely, downplaying the role of grammar in the articulation of thoughts, the expression of desire or affect, the regulation of social interaction, may cause our performative strategies to underperform – a sad and disturbing paradox.

Interlude 3 – “Doing language and grammar”: Dramatizing English comparative (*more than...*) and superlative (*so much*) forms; exploring the social grammar of trust and self-revelation⁵



Figure 2 – *Performing Fan* (Churchill, 2013)

⁵ “English in performance” classes, Master’s program in drama, U-Bordeaux Montaigne, 2024. A French translation of this piece was successfully used with future teachers of French as a foreign language in Morocco (Ecole Normale Supérieure de Tétouan, 30 Oct 2024) : “*Je l’aime tant et tant. Tellement plus que toi. Je pourrais me jeter par la fenêtre, avaler du feu, me couper la main, manger de la pâtée pour chat. Rien que pour le toucher, rien que pour lui dire, rien que pour le voir.*”

Love him so much
love him more than you
I'd jump out of the window
eat fire, cut off my hand, eat cat food
just to touch him, just to tell him,
just to see him.

In this intense monologue, the character's confession, and the expression of his obsession, rely on grammar and embodiment. Vocal inflection (pitch, stress, loudness), hand gestures, head movements, gaze intensity and eye orientation are used to endow *SO MUCH* and *MORE THAN* with expressivity. Variations and contrasts may be developed by making small changes to the script: LEXICAL (e.g. “love”> “hate”), PRONOMINAL (e.g. “him”> “her”), MODAL (strong and confident > insecure). Attention is also paid to the craving manifested by the *JUST-CONSTRUCTION*: “*just to touch / tell / see him*”. Bodies surge forward in a desperate attempt to grab the beloved one and tell them something. At the end of the monologue, the character adopts a silent, reflective posture, in sharp contrast with the agitation that was expressed previously. From a pragmatic perspective, a number of questions may be asked. What social codes govern an intimate or public confession? How does sincerity work in British culture? What are people supposed to display or hide in self-disclosure? What are the potential risks and benefits of confessing something (to a superior, to a stranger or to someone you know and trust)? Adapted from *Fan in Love and Information* (Churchill, 2013).

If we believe in the benefits of “drama as a pedagogical art form” (Schewe, 2013, p. 9), we must promote an embodied, non-reductionist view of grammar in language education, which connects patterns and markers to intonation, gestures and voice quality. We also need to accept that grammar is a key player in the everyday performance of language, that grammatical tools are instrumental in conveying perception, affect and understanding, that grammar is the ultimate regulator of social interaction.

3 Grammar of the (extra)ordinary?

Theatre has its own aesthetic and dramaturgical conventions. The dramatic discourse produced on stage, with its exaggerated use of pitch, loudness and intonation, with its expressive nuances and interactional twists, sounds definitely “special” compared to the more mundane uses of speech in real life. Yet, it essentially relies on the ordinary mechanisms of everyday communication. The stories represented on the stage, and most of the situations

enacted in educational drama workshops, invariably follow the common rules of human expression. These rules necessarily include syntactic and pragmatic rules.

Interlude 4 – “Doing language and grammar”: Exploring and experiencing the grammar of interpersonal manipulation⁶

In *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman & O’Brien, 1975), two young honeymooners, Jane and Brad, find themselves stranded on the road. Their car has broken down in the middle of nowhere. It is pitch dark. They see a strange castle “looming” in the distance and decide to seek help. They are anxiously waiting outside the front door.

Janet: *Let's go back. I'm cold and I'm frightened.*

Brad: *Just a moment, Janet. They may have a telephone.*

Jane uses the BE + PREDICATIVE ADJECTIVE CONSTRUCTION to characterize her physical sensations (“*I’m cold and I’m frightened*”). Lexical and grammatical form is given to bodily perceptions (which are non-linguistic in the first place). Both characters try to control their partner’s behaviour by using IMPERATIVE FORMS, which may be verbal (“*Let’s go back*”) or purely nominal (“*Just a moment*” meaning “*Listen to me!*”). Brad also uses an EPISTEMIC MAY-CONSTRUCTION to make a conjecture about the occupants of the castle (“*They may have a telephone*”). The modal construction is pragmatically used as an argument to persuade Janet to stay.

The participants work in pairs, exploring Janet’s body language and inflection (pitch, loudness, intonation) as she expresses her fright and discomfort, and begs Brad to go back to the car. Ways must be found for marking the assertive strength and desperation of “*I’m cold and I’m frightened*”, and also for conveying the supplication expressed by “*Let’s go back (to the car)*”. As they engage in locutionary action—arguing, objecting, complaining, begging, hypothesizing, etc.—the learners are expected to enact and feel the way Jane is weaponizing English grammar to control Brad’s behaviour. Brad’s attempt to reassure Jane by considering a more favourable scenario is explored in similar fashion, with due attention paid to the subtle combination of “tentativeness” and “persuasiveness” present in the modal construction (“*They may have a telephone*”).

When planning drama activities for a lesson or workshop, it is helpful to ask a few questions about normal language functioning. For example, how would ordinary speakers behave and

⁶ This simple exercise was used during special teacher-training workshops in Italy (Summer School, Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari Università degli Studi di Padova, 22-26 July 2024) and France (Plan académique de formation, Agen, Bordeaux, Mont-de-Marsan, Orthez, Périgueux, 2 February - 9 April 2025).

express themselves in a given situation? What reactions and “body-motion communicative behaviour” (Birdwhistell, 1970, p. 8) might they exhibit? Would breaking the rules and flouting conventional expectations reveal the existence of “habitual and standardized practices” (Goffman, 1967, p. 13)? Would challenging the natural and predictable order of things reveal how that order operates? In short, would departing from the norm reveal the norm?

Interlude 5 – “Doing language and grammar”: Exploring the grammar of politeness, embarrassment and interpersonal manipulation⁷



Figure 3 – The Awful Fate of Melpomenus Jones (Leacock, 1910)

Grammar regulates social action, and social action requires “social cooperation” (or “collaborative behaviour”). To get people to act or think the way we wish without unnecessary friction or loss of face, we must perform “manipulative speech-acts” with tact (Givón & Young, 2002, p. 50). But sometimes “things go wrong” with “the coherent script” that we thought would work, and some “awkward interaction” happens as result (Miller, 1992, pp. 190-97). In *The Awful Fate of Melpomenus Jones* (1910), the Canadian writer, humourist, and political scientist Stephen Leacock sets out to examine the “pitiful struggles” that may occur when guests want to leave. They will say things like “We must be going now” (as if some force were pulling them away or duty called them), and their hosts will respond with something like “Really?” even if they are tired and actually glad to see them leave.

In the story, the narrator presents the tragicomic case of “a young curate who simply couldn’t get away from people because he was too modest to tell a lie and too religious to wish to appear rude”. Indeed, the ill-fated Melpomenus is unable to extricate himself from his hosts. He is stuck, and fails to notice their growing impatience and annoyance. Submissively yielding to their demands, he soon finds himself looking at dull family

⁷ “Pragmatics in the Flesh” workshops, Master’s program in English studies (2022-24).

albums and tending to the needs of their impossible child. Eventually, he settles into their home, loses his mind, and dies. Leacock's tragicomic story is rewritten as a short, three-act farce, featuring the protagonist's "*pitiful struggles*" with the couple. The acts—or rather the three short scenes—are based on the story's original dialogues. They are followed by an epilogue, in the form of a pantomime depicting the "tragic fate" of the protagonist.

Act 1

Guest: *Well, I think I (should be going) ...*

Host 1: *Oh, must you go now? It's early yet!*

Guest: *Well, I think I...*

Host 2: *Oh, no! Mr. Jones, can't you really stay a little longer?*

Guest: *Yes... of course ... --er... I can stay.*

Host 1: *Then please don't go!*

(...)

Act 3

(Hosts shows the photo album. Guest is visibly bored but has to comply)

Guest: (Pleading) *I must say good night now.*

Host 1: *Say good night!*

Host 2: *Why it's only half-past eight!*

Host 2: *"Have you anything to do?"*

Guest: (Giving in) *"Nothing!"*

Students are divided into groups of three and assigned a scene to rehearse and perform. They are advised to use posture, inflection and facial expressions to convey feelings and make the discourse strategies apparent: GENTLE PERSUASION, INSISTENCE, ANNOYANCE, HESITATION, or EMBARRASSMENT. They do a first run, then a second run, paying due attention to the grammatical markers of NEGATIVE ASSERTION and POLITE COERCION ("*Please don't go*"). They also consider the tone of EXCLAMATIONS (e.g. "*Say goodnight!*"; "*Nothing!*"), the MANIPULATIVE FUNCTION OF MODAL CONSTRUCTIONS (e.g. "*Must you go?*"; "*I must say goodnight*"; "*Can't you stay a little longer?*") and other pragmatic phenomena. They do a second run with these considerations in mind. Later, they note down their own thoughts and impressions in their learning logs.

There is always a tendency to "overdo language" and caricature things in educational theatre. During drama workshops, participants are encouraged to engage wholeheartedly and leave their comfort zone, using exaggerated facial expressions, emphatic forms of articulation, and

unnatural modes of motion. Can such distortions and exaggerations teach us something valuable about ordinary language functioning? The answer is undoubtedly positive: whether we choose to mimic, enhance, distort, suspend or abolish the rules, the conventional patterns of human interaction—verbal and non-verbal—always provide the backdrop to theatrical expression. Linguistic and behavioural norms always serve as the ultimate frame of reference for everyone, even when liberties are wilfully taken with the social grammar of “tact”, “cooperation”, “self-respect” and “embarrassment”; when “the ordinary maintenance of face” is threatened by comic distortions; when “the traffic rules of social interaction” are deliberately flouted (Goffman, 1967, pp. 5-12)

4 From world to word: grammar “the helper” and “the gatekeeper”

The conventional, and largely ritualised, nature of human communication means that verbal messages can easily be shared and understood. However, fluidity and comprehensibility come at a cost: the events we witness or participate in, the thoughts that cross our minds and the perceptions and feelings that run through us, all end up being formatted. This is the inevitable consequence of transitioning from world to word, of giving linguistic form to non-linguistic experience. The moment language steps in, its own semiotic codes and expressive logic take over. Syntactic patterns gain the upper hand, as it were, and become the enforcers of law and order. Linguistic convention becomes a controlling force. Grammar and lexis impose their own frames, templates and categories (e.g. parts of speech; case relations; (in)transitivity; markers of tense, mood, aspect, voice, etc.). They keep a jealous eye on the dos and don’ts of verbal expression.

Grammar has thus an ambivalent role which is both productive (creative) and restrictive (coercive). It makes expression possible: if we master the rules and constructions, we are empowered with the “weapons of everyday communication” (Gumperz, 1964, p. 138). We can safely rely on grammar as a helper that binds words and constituents together into coherent utterances (lines), endowed with meaning and pragmatic functionalities. What is finely packaged by the speakers (actors) becomes deliverable to the social world (audience) with ease, speed and efficiency. But grammar also acts as a stern and inflexible gatekeeper, upholding the patterns and coercive rules of well-formedness. This is why traditional grammar lessons are rightly experienced by learners as stressful, although this need not always be the case. Performance-based activities may change attitudes to grammatical constraints and turn the ordeal into “fun”.

Interlude 6 – “Doing language and grammar”: Question time⁸

Linguists traditionally distinguish four major QUESTION-TYPES: *WH*-QUESTIONS, *YES-NO* QUESTIONS, *TAG*-QUESTIONS, and *ECHO* QUESTIONS. The main *DISCOURSE-FUNCTIONS* of QUESTIONS are information-seeking, confirmatory, directive, rhetorical. QUESTIONS are fundamentally interactive and other-oriented: they acknowledge the presence of the addressee and invite them to respond (or react)—at least in principle. QUESTIONS usually carry presuppositions and are rarely asked “out of the blue”: some event or situation acts as a trigger. Thus, in the opening scene of *Death of a Salesman* (Arthur Miller, 1949), Linda is surprised to see her husband Willy, a tired salesman, return from work so soon. In response to his sudden, unexpected reappearance, she asks him a series of *WH*- and *YES-NO* QUESTIONS: “*Why? What happened? Did something happen?*” Her QUESTIONS are thus *RESPONSIVE* and *INFORMATION-SEEKING*: she reacts to his presence and is eager to know the reason for Willy’s sudden return and bizarre behaviour. But her QUESTIONS also function as *EXCLAMATIONS* (“*Oh my god!*”) and *REQUESTS* (“*Tell me, Willy!*”).

Willy: *I came back.*

Linda: *Why? What happened? Did something happen?*

Willy: *No, nothing happened.*

Linda: *You didn’t smash the car, did you?*

Willy: *I said nothing happened. Didn’t you hear me?*

Linda also uses a *TAG-QUESTION* (“*You didn’t smash the car, did you?*”). The polarity is reversed and her meaning open to speculation: “I bet you did” or “I hope you didn’t”. Willy answers with an angry and reproachful *NEGATIVE QUESTION* (“*Didn’t you hear me?*”) which pragmatically functions as an accusation (“You are not listening!”) and a command (“Stop this, will you?”).

This is a multimodal seminar in English linguistics, with special vocal-kinetic or phenomenological “moments”, not a drama workshop, so students remain seated (or just stand in front of their tables). They identify the social setting and picture the circumstances. They close their eyes for a short moment and try to visualise the scene, imagining how the protagonists might express themselves. They hear the surprise in Linda’s voice and the aggressiveness in Willy’s responses. They open their eyes again, and together we discuss the form, function and interactional properties of the questions used by Linda and the answers given by Willy. Then comes our

⁸ “English linguistics: issues and frameworks”, Master’s program in English studies (2022-24), Université Bordeaux Montaigne.

special “grammar in the flesh” moment. We have a choice: we can either push the tables and “act out” the scene, with students rehearsing and performing in pairs, or we can create a “grammatical ensemble” using choral repetitions to highlight the stances, intentions and emotions, while developing variations in mood, tone and loudness. At the end of the choral ensemble, a soundscape is created: the lights are dimmed and the students close their eyes. Anonymous voices deliver the lines randomly and expressively, breaking the silence, echoing or answering each other, with frequent overlaps. Grammar as drama. Grammar with presence and inflection. Grammar reaching unusual levels of emotional engagement. Students later reflect on the powerful experience they have lived in class, and consign their impressions in their learning logs. “I loved the group performance and was deeply moved by it” (Elliot); “I thought I would be very shy and anxious about performing (even simple sentences) in front of everyone. However, even though I was apprehensive when I started, I quickly got into the performance and did my best. I found the overlapping voices very ‘deep’ and incredibly moving” (Pauline); “What I enjoyed most was the rising vocal intensity followed by total silence and suspended immobility. Everyone got involved. Some students performed their lines impressively.” (Leo).

In oral discourse, spoken utterances become inseparable from gesture, posture, stress, intonation and voice quality. The sensing, moving, speaking and cognizing body clearly acts as the main producer of language forms, the prime articulator of social meanings and the ultimate conveyor of personal intentions. Grammar is part and parcel of that phenomenological process, and is best viewed as enactive, affective and multimodal. Grammar is an embodied system of expression and social action that is tied to our moods and sensations and a key conveyor of “locutionary subjectivity” (Lyons, 1995, p. 337). Grammar conditions the ways we package information and engage in social interaction.

Yet at the same time, grammar makes us free and creative, if and only if we respect its forms and principles. Grammar empowers us with the ability to share our experience with others, using different angles and a myriad nuances. This is true of both spoken and written discourse.

Interlude 7 – “Bending the rules of grammar”: I am you, and you are me (or just anyone)

Paul Auster uses YOU instead of I in his *Winter Journal* (2012), as he recalls his life and takes stock. At times, he uses YOU generically and inclusively to mean ANYONE or EVERYONE. Auster also uses the PRESENT TENSE instead of the PAST TENSE when recalling past events. This produces a change in discourse strategy and creates a special dramatic effect. Using YOU (rather than I)

makes it easier to bond with the reader and establish a kind of existential solidarity. The SIMPLE PRESENT anchors the recalled sensations in current consciousness.

You think it will never happen to you, that it cannot happen to you, that you are the only person in the world to whom none of these things will ever happen, and then, one by one, they all begin to happen to you, in the same way they happen to everyone else.

Your bare feet on the cold floor as you climb out of bed and walk to the window. You are six years old. (Auster, 2012, p. 1)

Printed copies are handed out. The students walk across the room, stop and look back to embrace the past, before bending forward to contemplate the future. They space themselves out and freeze. The first reader-performer begins to stroll around the room, addressing individual members of the group. He or she occasionally stops in front of someone, makes eye contact with them, says something, and then moves on again. The original pronouns are preserved as the monologue is delivered. After two or three runs, variations are introduced: (1) “People think it will never happen to them, that they are the only persons in the world” etc. “My bare feet on the cold floor as I climb out of bed and walk to the window. I am six years old” (2) He thinks it will never happen to him, that it cannot happen to him, etc.” “His bare feet on the cold floor as he climbs out of bed...” A discussion follows. Can the students sense the difference? The use of first, second or third person forms does not change the nature of the scene but the perception of the events recorded. Which version is more dramatic and engaged? Which is more factual and detached? Which one fosters empathy?

5 “Speech acts” are the backbone of human expression (and good drama)

John Austin (1911-1960) was a British philosopher who developed a theory of everyday speech that was to have a profound impact on linguistics. Speakers, he claimed, are not idle talkers whose words dissolve into thin air. They are volitional agents who act upon the social world through the talk they produce: “to say something *is* to do something, or *in* saying something we do something” (1962, p. 94). This saying-is-doing principle is clearly at work in “explicit performatives” like “I apologize,” “I order you to...”, “I’m asking you to...”, “I’m giving this to you”, “I appoint you...”, “I warn you...”, “I congratulate you”, etc. It is easy to see that the function of these utterances is not to “describe” or “report” things but rather to perform different kinds of social acts: apologizing, ordering, bequeathing, etc. What the speaker says has a binding (“contractual”) and enactive (“operating”) force in society. But for this to work, the circumstances need to be “appropriate” and the speaker must have the “legitimacy” to

ask, warn, decide, guarantee, etc. If someone says “you’re hired” or “you’re fired” but is not in control, holds no authority over you, then their performative utterance won’t be effective. But if they are legitimate figures of authority, who are actually in control of things, then the mere utterance of “you’re hired / fired” will have the power to change your destiny.

Remarkably, Austin extends the principle of locutionary action (“doing things with words”) to other utterance-types. Not only do we perform a “phonetic act” (p. 95) whenever we “say” something, but we also do things for a given purpose: “asking or answering a question, giving some information or an assurance or a warning, announcing a verdict or an intention (...) making an appointment or an appeal or a criticism, making or giving a description” (pp. 98-99). These are largely “conventional”. Austin calls these actions “illocutionary acts” (p. 103). Interestingly, the locutionary and the illocutionary acts have “a consequential effect upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons” (pp. 101). Austin refers to these as “perlocutionary” (effects).

Interlude 8 – “Doing language and grammar”: Performativity at work in locutionary action⁹

Physical theatre emphasises the dynamics of “action and reaction” in life, and how we respond to “the provocations of the world outside” (Lecoq, 2019, p. 30). Many of the actions we perform are indeed *responses* to events that occurred or things that were just said. The physical reactions may be spontaneous or calculated. They always carry feelings and intentions, which are expressed through lexis and grammar, the tone of voice, the motions and postural adjustments of the body. In *Fired*—a short autonomous scene from *Love and Information* (Churchill, 2013)—the speaker’s anger and sense of moral outrage are triggered by the absence of “face-to-face” contact.

You shouldn’t fire people by email.

I’m just saying it needs to be face to face.

I need to be looked in the eye

just say it, you’re fired, just say it.

The speaker, who is clearly upset, feels disrespected by the manager’s unwillingness to engage in face-to-face interaction. The manager remains invisible throughout the scene – a despicable non-entity. While they are free to interpret the piece in whatever acting style they choose, the students must pay attention to the following linguistic features of the monologue: the

⁹ “English in performance” classes, Master’s program in drama, U-Bordeaux Montaigne, 2022-24.

presence of a prototypical PERFORMATIVE CONSTRUCTION (“*You’re fired*”) where “saying is doing” in a literal sense. More broadly, what is the speaker “doing” in terms of (IL)LOCUTIONARY ACT when saying “*You shouldn’t fire people by email?*” Reminding everyone of the rules and principles of common work ethics? Scoffing? Moaning? Whining? Attacking the boss’s toxic managerial style? The answer given will determine the stress, intonation and aggressiveness of the gestures used (e.g. a negative hand sweep).

Finally, how do the PRESENT PROGRESSIVE and the MODAL *NEED* work together in “*I’m just saying it needs to be face to face?*” How strong is the ASSERTION? Does it function as an argument, clarification or self-justification? The students choose which grammatical markers and (il)locutionary aspects they wish to highlight. More importantly, they must determine how assertive they should be, how much affect they want to inject into the scene, and what the ultimate aim of the diatribe is. They must also consider where they are going: “Acting and doing are the same. When you’re acting you’re doing something (...) An action has to go somewhere. It has to have an end. It can’t just hang” (Adler, 2000, p. 45)

John Austin's speech act theory shares an essential feature with Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model of speech (where speakers are likened to actors performing on a stage): both claim that speech-production goes beyond putting words together for communicative purposes. Speech is indeed a kind of “action” or “performance”. Something gets done when we talk, roles play out, and meanings are enacted. This performative conception of language is widely accepted by linguists, on the basis of Austin’s reflections in *How to do things with words* (1962). Yet, the socially performative nature of grammar tends to be overlooked in language education, even among proponents of “embodied”, “enactive”, or “drama-based” approaches. This is why we strongly encourage language teachers to re-visit Austin’s speech-act theory and re-appraise Goffman’s general claim that language has a “body to body starting point” (1983: 2), that speakers are not just talkers but “performers” (1959, p. 17) who project status, act out identities and express intentions through the medium of speech.

If Austin’s and Goffman’s perspectives are correct—which we believe they are and will remain—then performance-based approaches to grammar make perfect sense. Grammar is indeed a central component of language: it connects and binds linguistic units together; it channels and regulates the flow of meaning (including the expression of stance and affect). As such, grammar is an indissociable component of the social performance of language. Grammar should not be construed as a self-contained module, an abstract, disembodied system of markers and constructions that exist outside the embodied mechanisms of social interaction. Grammar is part and parcel of human expressive behaviour: not only does it play a crucial role

in sentence formation but it is also involved in establishing social contact, expressing attitudes and stances, effecting social manipulation, and carrying emotions. When used skilfully, grammar can be a trusted ally in the “language wars” that we witness or find ourselves embroiled in (Tolmach Lakoff, 2000). This is why language educators should reframe grammar as a key player in the social drama or human comedy that plays out in oral discourse. The performative nature of grammar is evidenced by the markers, categories and contrasts that typically lend themselves to symbolic action and physical expression, such as positive or negative assertion, interrogation, (un)certainty, volition, condition, concession, grounding, degree, quantity, logical connection, to name but a few (Calbris, 2011).

6 Conclusion

We use language to bond with others and express our basic needs; to prompt, organise or carry out social actions; to make sense of lived experience and reason about the world; to describe, report or evaluate situations; to express opinions and share personal thoughts and feelings; to control other people’s behaviour; to perform roles, negotiate status and regulate social interaction. Working on these core language functions and turning them into embodied social skills should be among the top priorities of all language teaching.

By encouraging the performance of vocal-gestural actions that are congruent with representational content, speech acts and communicative intentions, teachers can greatly facilitate the acquisition of language forms— lexical *and* grammatical. Posture, intonation and gesticulation are indeed involved in the articulation of core grammatical meanings and the realization of key pragmatic functions. As exemplified in “interludes” 2 to 6, classroom strategies may be designed for exploring the social dynamics of key grammatical processes, such as (negative) assertion, interrogation, degree and modality (to name but a few). Adapting and reworking situations from plays, novels or filmscripts is a valid option if the chosen scenes, moments or incidents are dramatically intense and grammatically explicit (e.g. “*Love him so much*” for the expressive use of intensifiers; “*Didn’t you hear me?*” for the polemical use of negative questions).

As students engage in marked forms of locutionary action through drama, recitation or choral repetition, they come to realise that grammar is not an abstract, disembodied system of rules but a carrier of meaning, intention and affect. They also understand that grammar regulates “the traffic rules of social interaction” (Goffman, 1967). But mostly, learners discover that “foreign” grammatical constructions carry emotions and meanings that they can personally relate to. This creates a sense of proximity and reduces the feeling of “otherness”:

what seemed so “different”, so “alien” in the first place, gradually undergoes a process of “de-alienation”, with a refreshing sense of presence and life– the life of a “living language”.¹⁰

Epilogue – “Grammar in motion”: Using Hamlet’s soliloquy (Act 3, Scene 1) to explore possible worlds¹¹



Figure 4 – “To die, to sleep. To sleep, perchance to dream...”

Drama students are split into groups of 4 and asked to develop their own variations around the PERCHANCE- and MAY-CONSTRUCTIONS in *“To die, to sleep. To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub, for in this sleep of death what dreams may come”*. Each group develops a dance based on: *“To die, to sleep, perchance to dream”*, stopping abruptly on *“Ay, there’s the rub!”* The performers move together rhythmically, repeating the words as an incantation. The second round is performed silently, with broken movements and sudden freezes to mark the distinction between dying... sleeping... dreaming... and complications arising. The third round is dedicated to HYPOTHETICAL REASONING: as they move, the performers give visible bodily shape to the abstract line of reasoning: *“If I die (posture 1), I WILL fall asleep (posture 2)”*, and then *“If I sleep (posture 3), I MAY have bad dreams (posture 4)”*. Physically moving from PROTASIS (the IF-CLAUSE expressing the condition) to APODOSIS (the clause that follows and expresses the consequence) makes hypothetical reasoning more concrete and tangible. In the last run, the performers adopt a more subdued style. They just stand and deliver their lines soberly, making small hand gestures that look considerably more natural. During the debrief, teacher and students

¹⁰ The phrase “living language” is more commonly used in French (“langues vivantes étrangères”) or German (“lebende Fremdsprachen”) than in English (“foreign Languages”) or Italian (“lingue straniere”).

¹¹ “English in the flesh” classes, Master’s program in drama, U-Bordeaux Montaigne, 2024.

discuss (among other things) the way IF, SUPPOSE, MAY, POSSIBLY, etc. can be used in English to explore possible (virtual) worlds. The experience is wholly immersive. The “feelers” in the group confess that they normally detest grammar but enjoyed the “dance” and the “grammar in motion” moment very much.

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