Review of *From Rules to Reasons* by Danny Norrington-Davies (Pavilion 2016)

by Scott Thornbury

Important monographs on teaching grammar seem to be timed to emerge every decade. There was Rutherford’s *Second Language Grammar: Learning and Teaching,* which appeared in 1987; Batstone’s *Grammar* in 1994; *Teaching Language: from Grammar to Grammaring* by Larsen-Freeman in 2003, and now Norrington-Davies’ new book can deservedly claim to be in the same ground-breaking tradition.

Each book reflects something of its immediate ‘zeitgeist’: Rutherfordbuilt on research into cognitive learning theory in order to promote the idea of consciousness-raising; Batstone further developed this theme while foregrounding the role of pragmatics; Larsen-Freeman situated grammar teaching within dynamic systems theory. Norrington-Davies interweaves all these threads, while at the same time foregrounding textual analysis, as well as acknowledging the way that corpus linguistics has blurred the distinction between grammar and lexis. At the same time, this book is not over-burdened with theoretical discussion, but speaks directly to teachers and has an eminently practical focus.

His starting point is Larsen-Freeman’s contention that underlying grammatical rules there are reasons: ‘Rules have to do with *how*, reasons with *why.* If one understands the *why* underlying the *how*, one appreciates how much more rational grammar is than it is normally given credit for being’ (Larsen-Freeman 2003, p.50). Norrington-Davies’ take on this is that learners can be encouraged to discover the reasons for themselves through, for example, guided textual analysis, on the one hand, and, on the other, textual manipulation in the form of what he calls ‘replication tasks’, i.e. tasks in which learners reconstruct or reformulate text they have already encountered, and ‘transposition tasks’, in which learners recast a text by changing one or more register variables, such as audience, mode, style, or genre.

In the first half of the book, Norrington-Davies makes a convincing case for a reason-driven rather than a rule-based approach to grammar learning and teaching. As he points out, the exercise of extracting reasons for grammatical choices, through textual analysis and task production, has a strong heuristic function, training both teachers and learners in developing the skills of language analysis. Moreover, reasons that are formulated by the learners themselves – even if they may not be consistent with those that expert linguists might derive from the data – are likely to be more memorable, more accessible and, ultimately, more amenable to modification, than the semi-prescriptive rules laid down in textbooks and pedagogical grammars.

Norrington-Davies exemplifies his argument with texts and tasks that have been trialled with students, and one of the most attractive features of this book are the statements by the students themselves, as they engage with the tasks that they have been set. Norrington-Davies uses these statements, which clearly display features of higher-order thinking, to make his case for the teacher-scaffolded, text-and-task based approach he advocates. The second half of the book continues this practical focus by providing 18 lessons, described and rationalized in detail, while part two of the second half outlines pedagogical strategies for designing similar lessons for specific and local contexts.

The text is well supported by references to the literature on grammar pedagogy, suggesting a close reading of contemporary texts. It is an oversight, perhaps, that the author neglects to mention the distinction between ‘grammar as structure’ (i.e. well-formedness) and ‘grammar as choice’, (Carter and McCarthy, 2006), since his book is concerned primarily with the latter. There is, after all, no particular reason why the past tense of regular verbs is formed with –*ed,* and hence there is no point in asking learners to speculate on the reasons for this. On the other hand, the choice between *Shakespeare says “All the world’s a stage”* and *Shakespeare said “All the world’s a stage”* is likely a considered one: both main verbs are well-formed, but the choice – while subtle – is meaningful.

More importantly, perhaps, is the lack of a clearly stated and coherent theory of grammar to undergird the arguments in favor of a grammar of choice. The author states, for example, that ‘When we view something as temporary, momentary or changing, or we view it unusually strongly, we can use a progressive form’ (p. 50). While this may be true, without a basis in a theory of grammar, it starts to sound dangerously like – not a reason – but a rule. Cognitive grammar, on the other hand, provides ‘the reason behind the reason’. This is because cognitive grammar is predicated on the understanding that, as Lee (2001, p. 48) puts it, ‘language is rooted in human experience of the physical world’. Thus, in perceptual terms, ‘the non-progressive aspect is characterised by a *maximal viewing frame*, the progressive aspect by a *restricted viewing frame’* (Radden & Dirven 2007, p.177). Thus, the difference between *I love my job* and *I’m loving my job* is that, in the former, ‘the non-progressive aspect describes a state seen with a maximal viewing frame. It provides an infinite view of an inherently unbounded and homogeneous, or lasting, state… [However], some states may be seen with a restricted viewing frame and allow us to take an internal view… The progressive with states makes us conceive of the state as having implicit boundaries in the same way that the progressive with the events makes us see implicit boundaries’ (ibid). Thus, the implication of temporariness is just that: an implication, i.e. one that we infer from the restricted viewing frame that the progressive form (*is loving)* instantiates.

While such an explanation may be way outside the comfort zone of most students, it is more a reason for the rule than the reason that Norrington-Davies supplies, and it might have been interesting to let teachers into the ‘secret’.

Nevertheless, despite these reservations, this book is a well-written, insightful introduction to the teaching of pedagogical grammar and its strong practical focus will be welcomed by teachers, both novice and experienced.

**References**

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