

Prescriptivism and the genre of pedagogical reference grammars for Italian students

Andrea Nava

Abstract Despite being thought of as – rightly or wrongly – one of the essential tools for instructed language learning, pedagogical reference grammar books are still mainly uncharted territory within English grammaticographical research. The aim of this paper is to illustrate some distinctive features of the genre of pedagogical reference grammar books for Italian students of English *vis-à-vis* the notion of prescriptivism. The genre originated in Italy in the 80s of last century as communicative approaches started to become mainstream in Italian schools. The analysis is based on a corpus of eleven grammar books and shows that the genre is rooted in a view of grammar and an approach to grammar selection and presentation which may be dubbed ‘pedagogical prescriptivism’.

1 The genesis of a genre

A comprehensive history of modern English grammaticography is still far from being written. The late 1980s and the 1990s saw a surge of interest in the investigation of English grammar writing (Leitner 1985, 1991; Graustein, Leitner 1989), yet the main thrust of these inquiries was the analysis of English descriptive/reference grammars – academic works written by linguists and aimed at scholars or postgraduate students. A few exceptions notwithstanding (e.g. Cook 1989; Chalker 1994; Ellis 2002; Nava 2008), the realm of modern English pedagogical grammar writing – works aimed specifically at students of English as a foreign language and their teachers – is still mainly uncharted territory, particularly the output of pedagogical grammar authors outside the UK.

As is well-known, the last three decades of last century saw a sea change in the methodology of teaching foreign languages, and in particular English. ‘Communicative language teaching’ established itself as the mainstream approach for teaching English as a foreign language and this so-called ‘communicative revolution’ spawned the publication of a plethora of teaching materials which bore little resemblance to the more traditional teaching books of the previous decades. What was more conspicuous in the new ‘all-singing all-dancing’ coursebooks, particularly those published in the UK at the outset of the communicative revolution, was a seeming

lack of grammar – or rather of a traditional grammatical syllabus underlying the contents and the sequencing of the teaching activities featured in the books. Instead, communicative coursebooks, particularly those of the ‘strong’ orientation (Howatt 2004), claimed to be based on a ‘notional-functional’ syllabus, which featured items such as ‘persuading’, ‘suggesting’, ‘asking for directions’, and shifted the emphasis from language knowledge to language use. Despite the popularity that such coursebooks enjoyed throughout Europe, both students and teachers were often puzzled by their ‘grammar-less’ or ‘grammar-lite’ orientation. Moreover, teachers were ill at ease with an approach that stripped them of their role as providers of knowledge and appeared more suited to the teaching of adults in community courses (Rizzardi, Barsi 2005; Balboni 2009). Within a secondary school context, a communicative approach had the effect of setting apart the teaching of foreign languages from the teaching of other subjects in the school curriculum. As pointed out by Cook (2008), irrespective of ‘pendulum swings’ in language teaching methodology, belief in the usefulness of an ‘academic style’ in the teaching of foreign languages has never really waned, particularly among students, who «despite the lack of explicit grammar in most contemporary teaching methods, [...] continue to believe that this will help them» (Cook 2008, p. 238).

Both in the UK and in Italy publishing houses were quick to capitalize on this unease and as early as the mid-80s the first output of what was to be a new ‘genre’ saw the light – the pedagogical reference grammar for students of English as a foreign language. Pedagogical reference grammars were a ‘new’ genre in the sense that they were not meant to be used as *the* teaching textbook and thus replace the communicative coursebook, but were aimed to supplement it, and as such lent themselves to being used by students working alone as well as in the classroom.

In actual fact, at least in the UK, within the genre of pedagogical reference grammars for students of English as a foreign language, three fairly distinct sub-genres were to develop (Berry 2010):

- a. ‘language-system-oriented’ grammars
- b. ‘learning-problem-oriented’ grammars
- c. ‘practice’ grammars

While ‘language-system-oriented’ grammars provide a thorough presentation of the grammatical system of English, adopting a word class analysis or a sentence structure analysis approach (or a mixture of the two), ‘learning-problem-oriented’ grammars attempt to address typical ‘problems’ that learners have (not strictly limited to morphosyntax) at a given level of proficiency and often, in the fashion of a dictionary, have entries organized alphabetically. ‘Practice’ grammars may still be thought of as ‘reference’ grammars, in the sense that they are meant to be used on an *ad*

hoc basis rather than sequentially like a coursebook, but feature more succinct explanations and devote the larger part of their contents to exercises.

In the Italian context, the tripartite distinction among subgenres of pedagogical reference grammars is hardly applicable, as ‘learning-problem-oriented’ grammars are virtually absent, while the boundaries between ‘language-system oriented’ and ‘practice’ grammars are less clear-cut, in that Italian-published grammars tend to feature extremely detailed and fairly exhaustive ‘explanatory’ sections.

2 The study: Corpus and methodology

The aim of this paper is to illustrate some features of the genre of pedagogical reference grammar books for Italian students of English and in particular the role that prescriptivism plays in the genre. As is well-known (e.g. Chalker 1994; Meyers 1995, Pullum 2010) prescriptivism has often been associated with pedagogical materials (grammar books, writing textbooks, usage handbooks etc.).

The corpus selected for the study consists of eleven pedagogical reference grammar books for Italian students of English, published in Italy mainly between the mid-1980s and the late-1990s. Although the genre is alive and well to this day in Italy, and pedagogical grammar books alongside coursebooks are to be found on the lists of adopted textbooks in virtually every secondary school in the country, it has been decided to restrict the focus on the early years of the development of the genre, since that is when the genre was at its most prolific. It should be pointed out that the items in the corpus are essentially five original books, which were republished, in slightly different versions, at later dates.

- a. Andreolli, Levi Fioretto, Gario, *English Grammar for Italian Students*, 1986
- b. Andreolli, Levi Fioretto, Gario, *English Grammar for Italian Students. New edition*, 1992
- c. Andreolli, *Reference Grammar for Italian Students*, 1998
- d. Bonomi, Pesenti Barili, Schwammenthal, Strohmenger, *The Grammar You Need*, 1988
- e. Bonomi, Pesenti Barili, Schwammenthal, *Grammar Matters*, 1994
- f. Camesasca, Martellotta, Gallagher, *Working with Grammar*, 1993
- g. Camesasca, Gallagher, Martellotta, *New Working with Grammar*, 1998
- h. De Devitiis, Mariani, O’Malley, *Grammatica inglese della comunicazione*, 1984
- i. De Devitiis, Mariani, O’Malley (2nd ed.), *Grammatica inglese della comunicazione*, 1989
- j. Jeffries, Pallini, *Talking Grammar*, 1999
- k. Pallini, *Grammar Alive 1/2*, 1996

The authors of the books in the corpus are practising teachers who, except in one case (Luciano Mariani), do not appear to have had a direct role in the flurry of teacher training activities, seminars, discussions, refresher courses about the principles and the practice of the communicative approach, often run by teachers' associations, that took place in Italy at the time. That notwithstanding, the authors' often long-standing experience in the classroom is very often flagged in the introductions to the books, as if to mark the difference from communicative materials written by academics and applied linguistics researchers, who were often felt to be out of touch with the constraints of the classroom and the experience of ordinary teachers.

In order to gauge the degree of prescriptiveness of the genre, the contents dealt with in the books (grammatical topics) and the terminology used are investigated. Although the text and paratext of the books have been surveyed in their entirety, more in-depth analysis has been carried out of the descriptive sections and the examples concerning one grammatical topic in all the books in the corpus (the future).

3 'Linguistic' prescriptivism

Within a grammaticographical context, and particularly in a diachronic perspective, the concept of prescriptivism is associated with a limited number of 'injunctions' - not limited to morphosyntactic issues - that for at least the last three centuries have featured in English grammar books and usage manuals. Such injunctions, often taking the form of proscriptions (e.g. 'don't end a sentence with a preposition'), have played an important role in the teaching of grammar and correct usage at all levels of instruction and are still often referred to as a yardstick of correctness, particularly in writing, in Anglo-Saxon countries. In a recent article, Pullum (2010) comments on some of these rules as featured in the century-old but still popular (in its 2009 edition) American usage manual *Elements of Style*, showing that «statements about grammatical correctness [...] are riddled with inaccuracies, uninformed by evidence, and marred by bungled analysis» (Pullum 2010, p. 34) and coming to the conclusion that the success of the book is «one of the worst things to have happened to English language education in America in the past century» (Pullum 2010, p. 34).

To investigate the degree of 'linguistic prescriptivism' in English pedagogical reference grammars, the corpus has been scanned for the presence of one prescriptive rule concerning the future, in other words the well-known rule prescribing that the auxiliaries *will* and *shall* be used in complementary distribution. According to this rule (as described in Huddleston, Pullum 2002, p. 195; cf. Table 1 below), *shall* is to be used in the first person of the 'future tense', while *will* is restricted to the second and

third persons. On the other hand, first-person *will* expresses volition and determination, the same meaning being conveyed in the second and third persons by means of *shall*. In the words of a British usage manual, «to express a simple future tense, use *shall* with *I* or *we*, *will* with *you*, *he*, *they*, etc.; to express permission, obligation, determination, compulsion, etc., use *will* with *I* and *we*, *shall* elsewhere» (Chambers 1985).

The rule was first set down in John Wallis' 1653 grammar written in Latin (Merriam Webster 1994, p. 841). Huddleston and Pullum (2002, pp. 195-196) clearly demonstrate that the «rule is not valid» in contemporary English. In the first place, the use of first-person *shall* as a future marker is virtually absent in American English and often perceived as formal in British English. In the second place, volition and determination can be expressed by either *will* or *shall* in the first person (although *will* is again the more likely choice) and in the second and third persons (where, however, *will* and *shall* express slightly different meanings).

Table 1.

Prescriptive rule			Descriptive rule		
	1st person	2nd/3rd person		1st person	2nd/3rd person
'Future tense'	shall	will	'Future tense'	will, shall	will
Volition/determination	will	shall	Volition/determination	will, shall	will, shall

The grammars in the corpus devote very little space to this issue, and on no occasion do they seem to uphold the 'linguistic' prescriptive rule. What the books highlight is a contrast between an 'older' usage and 'contemporary' English, which is said to extend the use of *will* to all persons of the future. Only Andreolli's grammars (Andreolli et al. 1986, 1992; Andreolli 1998) and De Devitiis et al. (1989) mention that the choice between *shall* and *will* may also be constrained by geographical (almost exclusive use of *will* in American English) and register (*will* more common in informal spoken English) variation. On the whole, it would seem that pedagogical reference grammar books for Italian students of English gently nudge readers to adopt the most current and most common alternative. In labelling the prescriptive rule as mainly older usage, they seem to limit its usefulness to receptive language use whereas in productive use the 'modern English' option appears to be the preferable choice. This is in keeping with the conceptualization of a pedagogical norm embodied in the books, which, as shown elsewhere (Nava forthcoming), draws on a 'neutral' use of the language by native speakers - an idealised spoken English, cleansed of diatopic or diastratic variations.

The results of this – however limited – investigation appears to suggest that prescriptivism, as a manifestation of ‘normative linguistics’, may not easily transfer across grammaticographical traditions. A recent example of this phenomenon is quoted in Tiken-Boon, Mesthrie (2010), who note that the Dutch edition of Lynn Truss’s bestseller ‘bible’ of modern prescriptivism, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* has met with scant commercial success in the Netherlands.

‘Linguistic’ prescriptive rules have held unremitting sway over the way English grammar has been conceived of and presented in pedagogical materials aimed at English native speakers and produced in Anglo-Saxon countries. Pedagogical materials aimed at foreign learners – particularly those produced outside the Anglo-Saxon world – appear to have followed a different route, and whether they can also be dubbed ‘prescriptive’ it is a different kind of prescriptivism that is at stake – to which I shall now move.

4 ‘Pedagogical’ prescriptivism

There are several sides to the phenomenon that I will call ‘pedagogical’ prescriptivism. On a more general level, it has been remarked (e.g. Cook 1989, 2008) that the contents of pedagogical grammar books as well as the grammatical syllabuses of coursebooks for English as a foreign language learners published in the last century or so have tended to look much the same, and may be said to represent a pedagogical grammatical ‘canon’ from which authors and publishers stray at their own risk. This has also been due to the often uncritical adoption by pedagogical materials authors of the Traditional Grammar framework and terminology, originally based on Latin grammar. As Berry observes with regard with what he calls «standard ELT grammar terminology», «a reader of Cobbett from 150 years before would find little difficulty in relating to most of these terms. [...] It is this terminology that has established itself in the consciousness of learners and teachers of English» (Berry 2010, p. 76). Ever since the beginning of English grammaticography, Latin had been viewed as the ‘ideal’ language, so the assumption was that categories and concepts devised for it also existed in English grammar. With this came the misconception that «beyond a description of the word classes and a few syntactic rules (e.g. for agreement), English was a disorderly mass, impossible to analyse» (Berry 2010, p. 65). According to this first ‘side’ to ‘pedagogical’ prescriptivism, then, grammatical features of the English language that do not lead themselves to being categorized and described on the basis of Traditional Grammar concepts and terminology are often either downplayed or omitted altogether.

Another aspect of ‘pedagogical’ prescriptivism is rooted in the well-meaning pedagogic principle whereby learning needs to build on what

learners are already familiar with and should not clash with learner expectations, beliefs and wants. With regard to grammar and grammaticography, Chalker (1994, p. 31) has identified three main beliefs that she ascribes to teachers but which may well be said to be shared by learners as well:

Many teachers believe that there must be only one ‘right’ way of describing something. [...] Many teachers unquestioningly accept the rules as holy writ, even in the face of conflicting evidence [...] they do not particularly expect grammatical rules to make sense. True, they know that tenses carry meaning, but even here a general feeling that the system is arbitrary is reinforced by the prevalence of superficial or misconceived rules.

The «right way» of describing grammar that, according to Chalker, teachers subscribe to, is – one assumes – the one sanctioned by the pedagogical canon, while the view of a ‘meaningless’ grammar seems to be particularly fitting for a language like English, which, as mentioned above, has traditionally been dubbed as ‘grammarless’ or ‘illogical’.

The rest of the paper will attempt to shed light on the extent to which pedagogical reference grammars for Italian students of English conform to ‘pedagogical’ prescriptivism. To do so, the way the books in the corpus deal with the ‘future’ as a grammatical category will first be investigated as this will give us some clues as to the role played by Traditional Grammar in the genre under investigation.

Whether the English language has a ‘future tense’ is still (to some extent) a controversial issue, as witnessed by Salkie’s (2010) recent article, suggestively titled *Will: tense or modal or both?* However, the mainstream view, embodied in Quirk *et al*’s grammars and Huddleston and Pullum’s recent work (2002), is that English lacks a future tense, *will* and *shall* being modal auxiliaries, unlike the Romance languages, where the future is a well-defined grammatical tense, marked as it is inflectionally on the verb.

The rejection of the category ‘future tense’ has a long-standing history in English grammaticography – it already shows up in Wallis’ 1653 grammar mentioned above. However, the Traditional Grammar view of the English future has doubtless been extremely influential in the pedagogical realm, as witnessed by the fact that it is embodied in hugely popular English as a foreign language pedagogical grammar books, such as Alexander (1988) and Thomson, Martinet (1990).

The pedagogical reference grammar books for Italian students in the corpus take a very similar stand on the issue of the future as a grammatical category in English. In general, it is acknowledged that there exists a variety of ways of talking about the future in English. The issue of whether ‘*will/shall* + base form’ makes up a distinct grammatical tense in English is not explicitly addressed in all but two series of books (De Devitiis *et al.*

1984, 1989 and Pallini 1996; Jeffries, Pallini 1999). The De Devitiis et al. books introduce the terms ‘time’ and ‘tense’ (*tempo reale vs. tempo grammaticale*) and briefly illustrate the English tense system as consisting of present and past, a view dating back to Jespersen (1933) and held in the Quirk et al. grammar books, including Leech, Svartvik (1975), the most likely source of De Devitiis et al. (1984, 1989). The 1984 book also provides a chart outlining the rough correspondences between ‘real time’ and ‘grammatical tenses’, but this is taken out in the second edition. Pallini’s two grammar books state that the future is not a ‘tense’ (*tempo*) in English, but provide no explanation of what is meant by the concept of *tempo*. It should be pointed out that the Italian terminology all but contributes to clouding the issue. In actual fact, the Italian word *tempo* is used to refer to both ‘time’ and ‘tense’. It would thus only be natural if learners were to take it as a transparent term (Berry 2010) and were to be puzzled to learn that the ‘futuro’ was not a *tempo* in English.

Apart from the De Devitiis et al. and Pallini grammar books, the other books in the corpus illustrate the form and the uses of the various ways of expressing the future without mentioning the ‘tense’ issue. Some of the books attempt to provide more iconic labels to describe the ‘will/shall + base form’ combination (e.g. ‘futuro con will/shall’, Andreolli et al. 1986), while others stick to the traditional terms (*futuro semplice*, Camesasca et al. 1993). The iconic terms are, however, often abandoned when the authors provide the descriptive commentary. An example is Andreolli (1998, p. 144), which starts its description of the form of the ‘futuro con will/shall’ with «il tempo futuro si forma con l’ausiliare...».¹ While the choice of using an iconic label appears to be a clue of the influence of the modern, linguistics-influenced conceptualization of the future, the reference to the ‘il tempo futuro’ betrays a return to the Traditional Grammar framework. Other instances of such inconsistency are widespread in the corpus.

On the whole, it could be argued that the Traditional Grammar view and terminology exert an important influence on the way English grammar is conceived of and presented in the genre of pedagogical reference grammar books for Italian students. Even when the authors seem to be aware of alternative ways of conceiving grammatical categories, as embodied in large modern descriptive grammars of English, they often fall back on the ‘default’ Traditional Grammar concepts and terms, particularly when dealing with formal aspects of English grammar.

The second aspect related to the concept of ‘pedagogical prescriptivism’ illustrated above that will be investigated is whether pedagogical reference grammars for Italian students conform to (learners’ and teachers’) expectations that: (a) there is only one ‘right’ way of describing grammar

1 The future tense is formed with the auxiliary.

(i.e. the Traditional Grammar-sanctioned one); (b) ‘canonical’ rules are set in stone, regardless of any conflicting evidence; (c) grammar is arbitrary or ‘meaningless’.

With regard to the issue of the English future, the ‘pedagogical canon’ that I have mentioned above identifies four main ways of talking about a future situation: (a) *will/shall* + base form; (b) *be going* + *to* + base form; (c) present progressive and (d) nonprogressive present. Other alternatives for conceiving of a future situation, such as the ‘futurish’ (Declerck 2006) forms *be about to/be on the point of* and the quasi-modal (Huddleston, Pulum 2002) *be to* usually fall outside the scope of the canon.

Most of the grammar books in the corpus seem to stick to the pedagogical canon. The four future forms are the ones that are presented and described to a greater or lesser degree of detail in all the books. Apart from the Pallini series, only the later editions of De Devitiis et al. and Andreolli extend the range of future forms to include *be about to/be on the point of*. *Be to* is dealt with in Pallini (1996), Jeffries, Pallini (1999) and in both editions of De Devitiis et al. Links with modality (*may* as an alternative form to *will* to express uncertain predictions) are established only in the Pallini books. It could thus be argued that only some of the more recent examples of the genre of pedagogical reference grammars for Italian students go some way towards extending the pedagogical canon and provide a more complex view of the English grammatical system.

With regard to the actual presentation of the ‘rules’, it is of some interest to investigate whether the genre accounts for possible deviations from the traditional formulations. One of these ‘canonical’ formulations views the form *be going* + *to* + base form as a ‘futurish’ form, in other words one of a series of verb forms which «combine reference to a post-present actualization with a sense of present judgement» (Declerck 2006, p. 337). In pedagogical grammar, this is usually conveyed through labels such as ‘intentional future’, ‘inevitable future as a result of present circumstances’. It is, however, the case that *be going* + *to* + base form is commonly also used as an actual ‘future’ form, as pointed out by Declerck (2006, p. 345):

There are also examples (especially in nonformal English) in which the post-present time of actualization is more salient than the present (e.g. *it is going to rain tomorrow*), in which case the difference between *be going to* and *will* is less pronounced: whereas the latter expresses a prediction, *be going to* is a means of talking about the future in a more neutral way.

References to this additional meaning of *be going* + *to* + base form can be found in the later edition of De Devitiis et al. (1989) and in Andreolli (1999). In the latter, it is also mentioned that this meaning is particularly frequent in spoken English.

Apart from providing descriptive details, do the ‘rules’ in pedagogical reference grammars for Italian students also help readers to develop a more general awareness of the underlying, interlocking systems of grammar (Leech 1994) or do they contribute to the stereotype that grammar is ‘meaningless’? I will look at two examples. One concerns the already mentioned ‘futurish’ forms.

The use of the non-progressive present to talk about the future is often presented in pedagogical grammar books as an ‘exceptional’ use of this verb form. It is definitely subject to restrictions and is indeed often associated with timetables and fixed schedules. This ‘exceptional’ use would be less difficult for students to make sense of if they were told that the underlying meaning of timeless occurrence of the non-progressive present is extended to talk about a future situation that is viewed as if it was timeless, in that it regularly occurs (e.g. a timetable) – whether now or in the future being immaterial. No attempt of making sense of this rule by establishing links with the core meaning of the non-progressive present can be found in the grammars in the corpus, where it is usually expressed by providing more or less exhaustive lists of associated contexts of use (timetables, dates, trips...).

By way of second example, let us now look at another ‘old chestnut’ of the pedagogical canon. This is the rule that proscribes the use of the future tense in the protasis of a conditional clause and in a subordinate temporal clause. An example of the way the rule is formulated in the grammars in the corpus is as follows (Andreolli 1986, p. 178):

In frasi subordinate introdotte da congiunzioni temporali (**when, as soon as, before, after, until, the first time**, ecc.), condizionali (**if, as long as**, ecc.) e molto spesso in frasi relative, si usa:

- a) il presente (semplice o progressive) al posto del futuro semplice (...)
- b) il passato prossimo al posto del futuro anteriore (...)
- c) il presente progressivo al posto del futuro progressivo (...)
- d) il passato prossimo progressivo al posto del futuro anteriore progressivo (...).²

In this formulation a quasi-mathematical equivalence is established (‘use the present tense instead of the future tense’) and as such the rule indeed appears wholly arbitrary. Again, no attempts to have learners understand

2 In subordinate clauses introduced by temporal conjunctions (**when, as soon as, before, after, until, the first time**, etc.), conditional conjunctions (**if, as long as**, ecc.) and very often in relative clauses, we use:

- a) the present (simple or progressive) instead of the future simple (...)
- b) the present perfect instead of the future perfect (...)
- c) the present progressive instead of the future progressive (...)
- d) the future progressive instead of the future perfect progressive (...).

the meaning of this pattern are made or at least hint at the reasons why this seemingly unintuitive rule holds in English.

The examples I have been illustrating would seem to suggest that a view of grammar as a more or less disorganized list of arbitrary rules, which I have argued is inherent in the notion of pedagogical prescriptivism, is also upheld in the genre of pedagogical reference grammars for Italian students.

5 Concluding remarks

The association between grammaticography and prescriptivism has long been a well-known and relatively well-researched aspect of English language studies. The analysis carried out in this article seems to suggest that a different type of prescriptivism, which I have called ‘pedagogical prescriptivism’, appears to be embodied in the genre of pedagogical reference grammars for Italian students. This involves a virtually immutable list of aspects of grammar, a ‘pedagogical canon’, and associated terminology, often originating from the Traditional Grammar framework. Whatever falls off the list is given scant if any attention. This restricted view of grammar goes hand in hand with a concern with ‘quick-fix’ rules and attempts at taxonomical precision (one book lists 6 different ‘uses’ of the ‘future simple’), which all but convey the idea that grammar is a mass of ‘meaningless’ and unconnected rules. Despite the relatively short diachronic span of the corpus, there is some evidence that the genre did not remain static over the ten-year period that has been investigated. Later editions of the grammar books show (however half-hearted) attempts at extending the pedagogical canon and departing from the Traditional Grammar concepts and terminology.

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