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Linguistics for children:
The intermodal presentation of English grammar metalanguage in materials for young learners

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ABSTRACT

Grammar has been slowly reintroduced in British schools thanks to projects such as the New National Curriculum for English, which explicitly include the "understanding of grammar" and the terminology required to discuss linguistic facts as objects of teaching. Many books that focus on grammar metalanguage instruction have appeared. A qualitative analysis of strategies adopted in an effort to produce a selection of materials for young learners (Years 1-6) shows that most publications feature a multimodal popularizing approach, akin to that of other types of scientific knowledge dissemination for children. This suggests that grammar terms are treated like specialized terminology, and that, although no true recontextualization of specialized concepts can be observed, reformulation and adaptation are pervasive in order to meet the needs, tastes and cognitive skills of the young "lay reader". For this reason, grammar teaching resources can be seen as a special form of popularization of linguistics for kids.

Keywords: grammar metalanguage, linguistics, popularization, English, young learners.

1. Introduction

The contents, methodology and rationale for grammar instruction have been the object of much debate in all major English-speaking countries over the past century (Hudson 2016). The history of grammar books in England started almost five centuries ago, supported by the rapid changes in the language and by its global spread. The tension between prescriptivism and descriptivism and between norm and usage has animated the debate of the

past 150 years at least and has impacted the policies that have informed education in Britain, as well as in North America and Oceania.

For centuries, grammar was seen as a useful asset for learners of non-native languages (be it Latin, Greek or modern languages), or as a way to improve writing or expression in "proper English". The categories of the classical tradition and a prescriptive approach were predominant. Linguistics as we know it today was still in an embryonal state, and the interest in studying the functioning of English *per se* was not yet widespread. In fact, the first half of the 20th century saw a lively debate between those who believed that grammar belonged in the foreign language classroom and those who thought that knowledge of how language works should start from one's own (Hudson – Walmsley 2005). However, there was no agreement as to the reasons for teaching grammar. Although some still argued in favour of the efforts required to master knowledge of language as a useful way to develop students' general cognitive abilities, by the middle of the century, the scepticism about the utility of grammar instruction in terms of literacy development, the prestige recognized by the academia to literary studies over linguistic studies, and the rejection of classical categories for the description of English slowly led to the exclusion of grammar from school programmes (Hudson – Walmsley 2005; Van Rijt et al. 2019).

The fortunes of grammar instruction began to change in the 1960s, when the new academic interest in the features of modern English emerging both in North America and Britain led to a "rebirth" (Hudson – Walmsley 2005). The work of pioneering scholars such as Chomsky, Fries and Hill in the United States (Fries 1951; Chomsky 1957; Hill 1958) and Quirk and Halliday (Quirk – Smith 1959; Quirk 1962; Halliday 1967; Halliday – Hasan 1976) in the UK reopened the debate on the relevance of linguistic knowledge. Academic research offered support to the teaching of grammar in schools. The functionalist approach to the study of language shifted the focus from Latin-based grammar to the importance of understanding the function of specific linguistic structures and the reasons behind the way in which texts are shaped as they are. This helped subvert the argument that knowledge of the traditional categories was in fact useless in terms of improving learners' command of the language. The first teacher training projects started to appear, such as Halliday's "Schools Council project at UCL" (1964-1971), which resulted in the development of much teaching material grounded in systemic functional grammar theory. However, the impact on school curricula was quite limited because of the technicality of the approach, whose terminology was perceived as obscure to most non-specialists (Hudson –

Walmsley 2005). Nevertheless, the development of modern-day English linguistics contributed to the diffusion of the idea that grammar can be a resource if it is not seen as a collection of rules and prescriptions but rather as the description of the ways in which language works. Over the following decades, policy makers fostered the debate, which led to increasingly strong recommendations that grammar teaching should be part of the curriculum. With the advent of the National Curriculum at the end of the 1980s and of the National Literacy Strategy ten years later, grammar was permanently brought back to the British education system (Hudson – Walmsley 2005), and its importance, including in terms of metalinguistic awareness, was established.

This article presents the results of a qualitative analysis of the communicative strategies used in a selection of learning resources to help young learners master the complex metalanguage of grammar. The main aim of the study was to verify whether the terminology necessary to discuss linguistic matters is treated as specialized vocabulary, and, if so, to investigate whether the same strategies observed in the popularization of specialized knowledge for young audiences in different domains (e.g., science, history, etc.) are also applied in books about grammar. Linguistic knowledge differs with respect to other scientific domains because grammar teaching can be considered as the most basic form of linguistics (i.e., the first introduction to the study of language), and therefore, there is no typical dissemination of knowledge outside the domain in which such knowledge is produced. However, it represents an instance of expert-to-non-expert asymmetric communication (Cacchiani 2018) and of knowledge transfer, "a systematic approach to capture, collect and share tacit knowledge in order for it to become explicit knowledge" (Graham et al. 2006: 15).

The case of grammar is also quite unique because, on the one hand, by the time children start learning about language, they are typically quite proficient speakers of their own language and sometimes of one or two more, but, on the other hand, their linguistic (and cognitive) skills are still developing. Teaching metalanguage to children as young as 5 years old means basically pushing them to focus on the building blocks of the complex tool they use for interacting with people around them, and to give a name to each piece of the puzzle. Many of the concepts they need to become familiar with are quite difficult to describe in simple terms, but since they can use language, they can be guided to reflect on what they can do with it: in other words, they can learn what parts of speech are by identifying their function in their linguistic productions. As children grow older, their communicative

skills become more advanced, their linguistic resources expand and so do their cognitive skills. Little by little, they are able to think in more abstract terms and understand the usage of complex structures and their semantic nuances, and therefore to describe them. The present study intends to cast some light on the ways in which teaching materials help young speakers become aware of the resources they exploit when communicating.

2. Grammar terminology for children

It is beyond the scope of this contribution to discuss in depth the history and the mixed fortunes suffered by grammar in English, American and Australian education, but a common issue has consistently emerged over the years, regardless of the dominant approach or perspective, namely, the need of a shared metalanguage to discuss language issues. Without going too far back in time, even at the beginning of the 20th century, when the features of English L1 were still a minor concern among scholars, and grammar teaching was mainly relegated to the study of classical or foreign languages, the need for shared categories and terminology was felt, to the point that a Joint Committee on Grammatical Terminology was created and published a report in 1911 (Hudson 2020).

Over the past century, linguistic research has flourished greatly, and the debate about terminological issues has become increasingly relevant, because it points to important underlying questions relative to the link between the development of linguistic conceptual knowledge and grammar education. Van Rijt et al. (2019: 623) have shown that many scholars and teachers support the idea of a "stronger bond between linguistics and education" so that the advances in the former may shift the focus of grammar education from a prescriptive or descriptive discipline to a source of linguistic insight or awareness. However, the results of academic research do not seem to influence school practice in any significant way as far as metalanguage is concerned. This is partly because of the increasing specialization of linguistic investigation, which has generated a wide range of terms and concepts, and partly because their rationale and significance are not always clear to schoolteachers (Gregory 2003; van Rijt et al. 2019). It is therefore not surprising that van Rijt et al.'s (2019) meta-analytic study has shown that most concepts and labels used in language teaching as well as in the literature on grammar education remain those of traditional grammar.

A number of studies on educators' attitudes towards grammar instruction (Fontich 2016; Hudson 2007; Mulder 2011; Ribas et al. 2014;

van Rijt et al. 2019) have identified issues with limited terminological clarity, proliferation and inconsistency in the labelling of central concepts in the teaching materials, as well as with teachers' self-reported insufficient knowledge of the basic metalanguage of grammar. The same difficulties in recognizing and defining the basic categories of grammar, with the sole exception of nouns and verbs, were observed by Alderson and Hudson (2013). They pointed out that university students' knowledge of grammar metalanguage has not improved over the past few decades, and that in fact, "a general reduction in school-leavers' knowledge of grammatical terminology since 1986" (Alderson – Hudson 2013: 334) could be observed (although not in foreign language learners), in spite of the renewed interest in grammar of the late 20th century.

The most recent answer to the demand for a terminological common ground in Britain dates to 2013, when an Appendix[1] was added to the National Curriculum which gathers 40 basic grammar terms all young learners (i.e., primary school pupils) must understand and be able to use. In line with the debate discussed above, a brief introduction underlines that, although the native language is learnt "naturally and implicitly", explicit knowledge of grammar is fundamental, because it provides learners with "more conscious control and choice". Grammar education is therefore framed as "applied" knowledge (rather than a discipline in its own right) which should develop "within the teaching of reading, writing and speaking". The concepts are organized according to the school year in which they should be introduced but "not necessarily […] completely understood" and should be revisited and consolidated in subsequent years if necessary. This observation and the fact that the list of terminology is accompanied by a Glossary,[2] which has the function of clarifying the meaning with which all terms should be understood, are suggestive of the real or perceived complexities involved in explaining and grasping grammar metalanguage. Most basic categories must be introduced in Years 1-4, while the more complex categories are introduced in Years 5 and 6. Accordingly, the National Curriculum states that pupils in Year 1 should learn the concepts of letter, capital letter, word, singular, plural, sentence, punctuation, full stop, question mark and exclamation mark. In Year 2 they should be introduced to the concepts of noun and noun phrase, statement, question, exclamation, command, compound, suffix, adjective,

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1   https://tinyurl.com/appendixnationalcurriculum, accessed December 2022.
2   https://tinyurl.com/metalanguageglossary, accessed December 2022.

adverb, verb, tense (past and present), apostrophe and comma. In Year 3 the categories presented are preposition, conjunction, word family, prefix, clause, subordinate clause, direct speech, consonant, vowel, and inverted commas (or speech marks). Year 4 adds determiners, pronouns, possessive pronouns and adverbials. In Year 5 more complex concepts are added such as modal verbs, relative pronouns, relative clauses, parenthesis, bracket, dash, cohesion and ambiguity. Finally, in Year 6, at the end of Key Stage 2, pupils learn about subject, object, active and passive voice, synonyms and antonyms, ellipsis, hyphen, colon, semi-colon and bullet points.

2.1 Grammar teaching as a form of popularization

Following the publication of these guidelines, many books have appeared by major and independent publishers aiming at explaining these key concepts in grammar, punctuation, and spelling, and at preparing pupils for their end of Key Stage 2 test (Years 3-6, age 7-11).[3] The main aim of this study is to discuss the strategies adopted in a selection of such materials to make grammar metalanguage easily understandable for children aged 5-11 (Years 1-6). The underlying premise is that making linguistic terminology semantically and cognitively accessible for children can be considered as a form of popularization of linguistics, i.e., specialized knowledge. The latter has been traditionally defined as the reconceptualization and recontextualization of expert discourse that meet the needs, tastes and background encyclopaedia of lay readers (Calsamiglia – Van Dijk 2004; Garzone 2006; Gotti 2013; Cappelli 2016; Cappelli – Masi 2019). However, as mentioned in section 1, grammar metalanguage cannot be truly discussed in terms of recontextualization: it should rather be seen in terms of adaptation of specialized knowledge to suit the needs of young learners. Children learning grammar concepts can only be considered as "lay readers" of linguistics because of their age and consequent lack of experience with linguistic reflection rather than because of scarce knowledge of the subject matter, as in the case of people reading about scientific discoveries in newspapers or magazines. After all, they have a well-developed heuristic knowledge of language (i.e., of the subject matter) by the time they are imparted the first metalinguistic instruction. In this sense, grammar teaching resources can be considered as tools for knowledge transfer from more experienced experts

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[3] Teaching resources to develop metalinguistic knowledge are also widely available online (e.g., http://www.twinkl.co.uk, accessed December 2022).

to momentary non-experts in the same field, that is as a way to turn "tacit knowledge" into "explicit knowledge", which allows individuals "to access and utilize essential information, which previously was known intrinsically to only one or a small group of people" (Graham et al. 2006: 15). Despite the unique status of grammar education materials, Calsamiglia – Van Dijk's operational definition of popularization can still provide a useful framework to describe the strategies adopted in teaching materials, as it can be seen as "a vast class of various types of communicative events or genres that involve the transformation of specialized knowledge into 'everyday' or 'lay' knowledge […]" (Calsamiglia – Van Dijk 2004: 370).

Popularization discourse has received much attention over the past twenty years. Studies have focused on the verbal and non-verbal strategies used to allow language users to relate new representations to old representations and to make sure that new concepts become "accessible" to the reader (Calsamiglia – Van Dijk 2004; Cappelli 2016; Gotti 2013). Studying popularization for children is especially interesting, because the approach taken to introducing technical concepts must account for the fact that children might lack both useful background knowledge and some cognitive skills to process the new information (Cappelli 2016; Turnbull 2018; Bruti – Manca 2019; Cesiri 2019; Diani – Sezzi 2019).

The presentation of new concepts must necessarily take into account the cognitive profile of the different age groups for which it is intended. In psychological terms, childhood can be divided into four main phases (Valkenburg – Cantor 2001). Throughout the stages of infancy (0-2), early childhood (3-5), middle childhood (6-12) and adolescence (13-19), children vary in terms of ability to concentrate and self-regulate, attention span, interests and relational skills. Young children (0-5) cannot focus on details and quality, therefore books addressing this age group typically feature simple, colourful illustrations, and hands-on activities such as stickers or flaps. They usually include popular fictional characters, which can provide an anchor to known elements. They exploit fairy-tale-like narration (Valkenburg – Cantor 2001). During the early school years, centration (the ability to centre one's attention only on striking features of objects) decreases, and children develop an improved ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Their attention span is longer, and they start to prefer social play and faster paced entertainment. They can appreciate complex plots and characters and more difficult and varied contents, including humour. They are more responsive to verbally oriented information. Books for this age group may include longer texts, anecdotes and "fun facts", and

game-like activities with a formative aim. Through late middle childhood (9 to 12), children develop a more complex interest in real world phenomena and entertainment designed for adults. By the age of 9, they prefer more non-fictional entertainment and become attached to real-life heroes such as sports and movie stars (Valkenburg – Cantor 2001). They also develop a taste for collecting and accumulating. This accommodation of the psychological features of the target audience is in itself a way of promoting understanding of specialized contents. The next sections will discuss how such adjustments are exploited in grammar teaching materials.

3. The dataset

The qualitative analysis of the strategies used for teaching grammar, spelling and punctuation was carried out in a small corpus of materials published by popular publishing houses located in the UK and USA. To select the materials which are most commonly used or recommended for home study, a survey was sent to twenty teachers of English and *Language Arts* working in the UK across Years 1-6. Most of them claimed that no textbook is officially adopted by the institutions in which they operate, but teachers can choose to recommend specific self-study materials or exercise books that children can use at home for homework or in preparation for tests and exams. When introducing concepts, these teachers tend to rely on handouts that they create or that they find on sharing platforms such as www.twinkl.co.uk. Some, however, recommended popular resources that they have used over the years or that are held in high esteem in their professional community.

The dataset analyzed does not include teacher-generated materials or handouts found on sharing sites. Neither does it include videos published on dedicated YouTube channels, which are however quite popular among English teachers, and which would certainly make for an interesting set of data to expand the present analysis. The books which were included are classified into reference materials, teaching materials and narrative teaching materials and were the following:

1. [Reference materials] *The Great Grammar Book*, Bodley Head (1996);
2. [Reference materials] *Collins Easy Learning Grammar and Punctuation*, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., UK (2009);
3. [Reference materials] *Oxford Primary Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, UK (2012);

4. [Reference materials] *Junior Illustrated, Grammar and Punctuation*, Usborne, UK (2016);

5. [Reference materials] *Visual Guide to Grammar and Punctuation. A first reference for young writers and readers*, DK, Penguin Random House, USA (2017);

6. [Reference materials] *Everything You Need to Ace English Language Arts in One Big Fat Notebook: The Complete Middle School Study Guide*, Workman Pub Co., UK (2018);

7. [Reference materials] *First Illustrated Grammar and Punctuation*, Usborne, UK, (2019);

8. [Reference materials] *Lift-the-flap Grammar and Punctuation*, Usborne, UK (2020).

9. [Teaching materials] *Treasures' Grammar and Writing Handbook*, Grades 1-5, Macmillan/McGraw-Hill, US (2007);

10. [Teaching materials] *Collins Primary Focus, Grammar and Punctuation*, Pupil Book 2, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., UK (2011);

11. [Teaching materials] *Nelson Grammar*, Pupil Books Year 1 to 6, Oxford University Press, UK (2014);

12. [Teaching materials] *Grammar and punctuation*, Workbooks ages 5-7, 7-8, 8-9, 9-10 and 10-11, Scholastic, UK (2015);

13. [Teaching materials] *Jumpstart! Grammar, Games and Activities* for Age 6-14, Second Edition, Routledge, UK (2016);

14. [Teaching materials] *Collins Vocabulary, Grammar and Punctuation Skills*, Pupil Books 1-6, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., UK (2017);

15. [Teaching materials] *Skill Sharpeners Grammar and Punctuation*, Grades 1-6, Evan-Moor, USA (2019).

16. [Narrative teaching materials] *A Verb for Herb, Grammar Tales*, Scholastic, UK (2004);

17. [Narrative teaching materials] *Chicken in the City*, *Grammar Tales*, Scholastic, UK (2004);

18. [Narrative teaching materials] *Punctuation, the Write Stuff*, Kingfisher, UK (2018).

The resources marked as "teaching materials" mention their intended readership explicitly by indicating the Year (UK) or Grade (USA) for which they are meant. For the reference materials, determining the ideal readership is more complicated. However, on the basis of the British National Curriculum's recommendations, we can conclude that publications (1), (8), (16), (17) and (18) are meant for the youngest audience (Years 1-3),

publications (3), (5) and (7) are designed for Years 2-6, and publications (2), (4) and (6) are thought to be for Years 5 and 6, and possibly high school. The publications were assessed in terms of the general approach they take to the teaching of grammar, and the popularization strategies used to introduce grammar concepts.

4. Approach and strategies

The books selected for the study differ quite significantly in their approach, but all share a common view of the role of grammar teaching and knowledge as contributing to individual competence and communicative skills. Recognizing parts of speech and types of syntactic constructions or being able to parse sentences (i.e., developing metalinguistic awareness skills) is not the ultimate goal of grammar learning, as in other education systems which have been influenced more by the tradition of classical studies (e.g., in Italy). Rather, these skills are functional to improving writing and speaking skills. It is therefore not surprising that punctuation is an integral part of the language arts curriculum.

This approach to grammar derives from the debate about the rationales for teaching grammar described in sections 1 and 2 and is evident in both the most traditional and the most innovative materials. Publication (13), *Jumpstart! Grammar*, is very popular in the UK and it is thoroughly grounded in this active approach to grammar. It presents a collection of game-like activities meant to develop the linguistic skills of young learners and, in parallel, their metalinguistic awareness. The introduction by Pie Corbett and Julia Strong, the authors, perfectly summarizes the approach on which the materials included in the dataset rely. They refer to their methodology as "grammar in action" or "syntactical gymnastics" (p. xii) and state that grammar teaching works best when it is "directly related to using grammar as a part of a child's growing repertoire as a writer" (p. xii). They talk about it as a way to "develop an increasing control over language" (p. xiii) and support grammar in context as opposed to "the formal, isolated teaching of grammar" (p. xiii): knowing the label for a certain category is "pointless": what matters is being able to use it effectively (p. xvi). "Grammar is not really 'knowledge'", they write, "rather it is a matter of grasping a 'concept'. Keep such teaching simple and clear with the focus on gaining control over words, sentences and the flow of writing" (p. xiv). Even in the more traditional materials, which do not include such explicit declarations of intents, this

attitude towards grammar learning emerges in the activities proposed. Some include mistake correction exercises, "test yourself sections", "try your hands at it" exercises and boxes with important mistakes to avoid or practical tips for improving one's expressive skills. Such activities do not focus on recognizing the specific elements presented in the units but rather on the ability to use them correctly. Knowing what a certain part of speech is can only be useful if it allows learners to form sentences correctly.

Although the academic debate of recent decades has tried to reject a prescriptivist approach to the study of English, the books included in the dataset tend to promote a "correct" use of the language. Publication (2) is based on corpus data and Penny Hands, the author, points out that it illustrates the way in which "English grammar works in today's world" (p. 3). Nevertheless, these observations are functional to "making confident and accurate decisions" and "the commonest errors have been noted and highlighted, with tips given to help learners avoid them" (p. 3). Dwelling on the implications of such an approach is beyond the scope of the present discussion, but it confirms van Rijt, de Swart and Coppen's (2019) conclusions relative to the "conservative" nature of grammar teaching materials, both in terms of concepts and, it seems, of approach to language standards.

The next few sections therefore illustrate the strategies adopted in the books analyzed to help young learners "grasp" the traditional concepts that still form the basis of linguistic education nowadays. In fact, the books in the dataset take into account the cognitive features of their readers. They vary greatly in terms of the extent to which they do this, however. The ideal users of these materials are in their middle childhood, with some books being suitable for late early childhood or adolescence. A word of caution is in order. The distinction between verbal and non-verbal strategies is purely functional to the illustration of data. With very few exceptions, linguistic and visual resources contribute inextricably to meaning making and knowledge transfer in the vast majority of the materials included in the corpus, especially those addressing younger learners.

4.1 Verbal strategies

The language used in the books is that of asymmetric communication, that is, of expert-to-non-expert discourse (Cacchiani 2018). Knowledge transfer relies mainly on explanatory strategies (or illustration procedures; Gülich 2003) and reformulation (Ciapuscio 2003; Calsamiglia – Van Dijk 2004), since children need to learn to recognize parts of speech.

The verbal strategies adopted in the materials included in the dataset are the same regardless of the learners' age, but the language used matches the presupposed communicative competence of the readers. Examples (1) – (5) are ordered according to the age of the ideal reader of the book. Several strategies are used ranging from generalization (i.e., the use of general terms instead of specialized terms), to exemplification, denomination and explanation in terms of function. Various typographic effects are exploited, such as bolding, colouring or striking through words.

(1)   Sometimes, smaller words such as **I** or **it** stand in for a noun. They're called PRONOUNS and they help to avoid repetition. (Usborne *First Illustrated Grammar and Punctuation*)

(2)   Sometimes we don't want to keep repeating the same noun over and over again. Instead, we can use a **pronoun** to replace the noun. **Freddie** is a fast runner. ~~Freddie~~ **He** always wins. One day I want to beat ~~Freddie~~ **him**. (*DK Visual Guide to Grammar and Punctuation*)

(3)   Pronouns are little words, such as 'he' or 'us', that can take the place of a person, an animal or thing. (Usborne *First Illustrated Grammar and Punctuation*)

(4)   Pronouns are words like 'I', 'it, or 'they', that refer to a person, an animal or a thing without giving its name. Pronouns can also stand for something that's been mentioned or something that will be mentioned. (Usborne *Junior Illustrated, Grammar and Punctuation*)

(5)   If we do not want to repeat the same noun in a sentence or a paragraph, we can replace it with a **pronoun**. A **pronoun** is a word that is used instead of a noun phrase or a noun. (*Collins Easy Learning Grammar and Punctuation*)

Illustration and reformulation tend to cooccur as in example (6), where the definition of 'noun' is provided in terms of its function and is followed by an instance of denomination which offers an alternative label (i.e., reformulation). Examples of nouns are provided immediately under the definition.

(6)   A **noun** is a word that labels a thing or an idea. Nouns are sometimes called 'naming words'.

table   book   ugliness
time   animal   thing
(*Collins Easy Learning Grammar and Punctuation*, p. 13)

Definitions/descriptions and exemplification are by far the most common illustration procedures found in grammar teaching books. Calsamiglia – Van Dijk (2004) distinguish between "definitions" and "descriptions" by specifying that the former explain unknown words and the latter explain unknown things. However, these labels are often used interchangeably in the literature on explanation and the distinction between the two categories is not always easy to make in the case of this study, since the "things" explained are "words". Example (6) is taken from a reference book for older learners, so it is quite traditional in format and style. Both reference materials and teaching materials for younger learners adopt simpler language and intermodal construction of meaning (cf. section 4.2). As in (6), the concepts introduced are in bold and are defined in terms of their function and through denomination. Interestingly, examples are illustrated to make it easier for young children to understand the relationship between words and referents and possibly to help them read the words. Thus, in *Nelson Grammar*, the words 'chair', 'bucket' and 'mat' appear under the three corresponding images.[4] Concepts are sometimes introduced via simple explanation, often followed by denomination and exemplification as in (7) and (8).

(7)   The things, animals and people in the world around us all have names. These names are called **nouns**. (*DK Visual Guide to Grammar and Punctuation*)

(8)   A **noun** names a person, place or thing. (*Treasures' Grammar and Writing Handbook*, Grade 1)

Very frequently, definition, explanation, denomination and exemplification cooccur in the presentation of the concept as in (9):

(9)   **Grammar** is the study of the way we use words to make **sentences**. Words can be divided into groups called **parts of speech**. Three **parts**

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4   Oxford University Press did not grant permission to reproduce fragments from *Nelson Grammar*. However, sample pages can be viewed here: http://fdslive.oup.com/ www.oup.com/oxed/primary/literacy/nelson_skills/Nelson_Grammar_QuickLook. pdf (accessed December 2022).

of speech are **adjectives**, **nouns** and **verbs**. (*Collins Primary Focus, Grammar and Punctuation*)

Reformulation occurs frequently in the form of juxtaposition as in (10), where terms like 'verb' and 'subject' are explained by a paraphrase, less specialized lexical items or a generic definition. Metalinguistic terminology can either precede or follow the defining element.

(10)   Most sentences contain a verb (or action word) and a subject (the person or thing doing the action). These two parts of the sentence need to match, or 'agree'. (*Junior Illustrated, Grammar and Punctuation*)

Metalinguistic terms are sometimes explained through similes and anchoring to the reader's experience and knowledge as in (11) and (12):

(11)   Words are like pieces of a jigsaw. We need to fit them together properly to make meaning. (*DK Visual Guide to Grammar and Punctuation*)

(12)   When speaking, you might pause when you've finished saying something, or you might shout if you are angry. When you write, you use **punctuation** to make your meaning clear. (*DK Visual Guide to Grammar and Punctuation*)

No metaphors were found to introduce metalinguistic concepts verbally. The sole exception is the conceptual metaphor underlying the view of language as a mechanism made up of parts which can be dismantled and put back together as in a large machine found on the back cover for Usborne *Lift-the-flap Grammar & Punctuation*:

(13)   This book will show you how English really WORKS. Take language apart with the Great Grammar Machine, find out what each part does – and then put it back together again using the Silly Sentence Maker. (Usborne *Lift-the-flap Grammar & Punctuation*)

Grammar teaching materials for young learners also adopt some verbal strategies that are meant to support attention, enhance memory and promote involvement. Such strategies can be seen as supporting the communicative dimension of knowledge dissemination and transfer (Turnbull 2018), that is, they help create a bond with the reader and a positive attitude towards the contents presented. Examples of such strategies are the use of forms of address that speak directly to the reader, such as questions and the use of second person pronouns as in (14), the use of informal vocabulary which

is typical of children as in (15) or the use of rhymes as in (16). Game-like activities and quizzes also help the learner's involvement.

(14)   How is it done? Many adverbs show **how** something is done. (Usborne *First Illustrated Grammar and Punctuation*).

(15)   These words are all muddled up! […] The words in the sentence need to work together to make the meaning clear. (*Oxford Primary Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling Dictionary*)

(16)   Remember!
A noun on its own
Is just a thing.
A verb makes it **run**,
And **dance**, and **sing**!
(*DK Visual Guide to Grammar and Punctuation*)

4.2 Format, composition and the role of visual resources

Most of the materials in the dataset are multimodal, because metalanguage is presented and made accessible to young learners through the interaction of different semiotic codes (Kress – van Leeuwen 2006; Cappelli 2016). The composition of the pages in the teaching materials, i.e., "the way in which the representational and interactive elements […] are integrated into a meaningful whole" (Kress – van Leeuwen 2006: 176), is generally not overly innovative. Images are occasionally purely decorative (Roth et al. 2005), as in publication (14), or altogether absent as in publication (9). Most workbooks are indeed quite traditional in their graphic style and in the organization of the contents. They address children aged 5 to 11 and their layout adapts to the readers' ages: the non-verbal elements are widely exploited in books meant for younger learners, whereas the verbal component plays a bigger role in books for older learners. Teaching materials for Years 1-4 use large fonts and little text, moving to smaller fonts and more crowded pages in resources for Years 5 and 6. They all exploit colours for highlighting important information and keywords, and some resort to unusual fonts for headings and subheadings. Tips and relevant information to keep in mind are often presented in text boxes with coloured backgrounds or different fonts. Graphic aids like arrows and circles are omnipresent.

Although the level of interaction of language and images varies greatly in the books investigated, with the few exceptions mentioned, illustrations are

widely used in materials for young learners. Some workbooks include fictional characters which guide them to the discovery of parts of speech or grammar rules, such as in the case of (12), the Scholastic's *Grammar and Punctuation* series, in which an owl provides learners with definitions in comics-style bubbles (Fig. 1)[5] or asks questions like "how did you do?". This is a communicative strategy (Turnbull 2018) that is commonly used in the popularization of specialized knowledge for young readers (Cappelli 2016; Cappelli – Masi 2019) and exploits the early childhood's interest in fictional characters.

Figure 1. Adjectives, *Grammar and Punctuation*, Workbook ages 5-7, Scholastic

Pictures also function as exemplars. In publication (11), when nouns are introduced, the word chair and the corresponding picture illustrate the syntactic category. In these cases, however, images do not seem to contribute directly to defining parts of speech. Rather, they visually exemplify the part of speech at issue, that is, they are in a relation of exemplification with the text which introduces nouns (Unsworth 2006). However, they are also in a relation of exposition with the accompanying written words: they express the same content in an alternative mode (Unsworth 2006). This might be meant to support the reading skills of children who are new to literacy.

        In a way, the use of pictures in grammar teaching materials for children seems to function as a multimodal anchoring strategy. As mentioned above, learning what different structures are essentially means learning to label linguistic material which is already implicitly known. Showing that words that name objects like 'bucket' or 'mat' are called 'nouns' means teaching

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5   I would like to thank Scholastic Education for granting permission to reproduce the images taken from their publications.

children to categorize known words into classes, just like using the picture of a castle to explain 'silent letters' anchors a metalinguistic definition to a probably very familiar item. Most children will know what the building in Fig. 2 is and will learn how to spell the word in Year 1, thus becoming aware of a difference between spelling and sound in the word 'castle'. Similarly, in *Nelson Grammar*'s Pupil Book 1B, children learn that 'Tom' is a proper noun through an illustrated dialogue between two children meeting for the first time. This anchors the function of this part of speech to children's familiar experiences, thus providing a recognizable example of names.

Figure 2. Silent letters, *Grammar and Punctuation*, Workbook ages 5-7, Scholastic

The visual component in the reference materials is generally more interesting and more innovative, with the sole exception of publication (2), *Collins Easy Learning Grammar and Punctuation*. The book is actually meant for Year 6 and older and, therefore, it is organized as a classic handbook, with no illustrations. The only visual strategies adopted are the use of light blue for titles and keywords, and bold and italic fonts for examples and for the names of parts of speech. Publications (1) and (3) – (8), in contrast, are very interesting in terms of the multimodal strategies adopted to introduce metalinguistic concepts to young learners.

Publication (6), like (2), is meant for teenagers and, interestingly, the layout reproduces that of a notebook. It exploits different font styles for headings and keywords, and the body of the text is written in a font that mimics handwriting. Illustrations look like drawings and are generally illustrative (Roth et al. 2005) of some of the verbal content on the page. However, they appear to have an overall decorative function rather than to help clarify concepts. For instance, a clock and a compass appear on page 2, which introduces phrases. They only relate to the mention of time and space which figures in the box dedicated to defining prepositions. Definitions are usually presented in textboxes with coloured backgrounds and examples are marked by graphic aids such as highlighted labels linked to textual examples by arrows.[6]

Publications (3), (4), (5) and (7) are meant for learners of Years 3 to 5. Although they differ remarkably in their style, they share similar multimodal meaning making strategies. They all have a vertical organization, with a title indicating the metalinguistic concept introduced in the section, a brief verbal introduction to the concept immediately under the title and then one or two columns with verbal examples or further explanations that are enhanced by non-verbal elements such as illustrations, pictures, graphic aids, and typographic elements (Fig. 3). Just as in teaching materials, the size of the font and the amount of text present on the page varies to meet the needs of the ideal readership of the individual resources.[7]

An introduction and instructions on how to use the books precede the actual chapters, and these sections too exploit the integration of verbal and non-verbal elements to help readers understand what type of information is available and how it is organized (Fig. 4). Interestingly, in the introduction to the DK *Visual Guide to Grammar and Punctuation* different animals explicitly remind the reader that "When you learn about the grammar of your own language, the most important thing to remember is that you already know most of it. Every time you open your mouth to speak, you are using grammar without even realizing it!" (p. 4).[8]

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[6]   Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdS9HqsHTkw&t=51s (accessed December 2022).

[7]   We could not obtain permissions to reproduce fragments of publication (5), DK's *Visual Guide to Grammar and Punctuation*, in time for the submission of this article. However, a preview of the style adopted in this book can be seen on the website of the publisher at the URL https://www.dk.com/us/book/9781465462589-visual-guide-to-grammar-and-punctuation/ (accessed December 2022).

[8]   We could not obtain permissions to reproduce fragments of publication (5), DK's *Visual Guide to Grammar and Punctuation*, in time for the submission of this article. However,

Nouns

Nouns are words that tell you the name of something. A noun can be a person, an animal, a thing or a place.

Molly   walrus   computer   India

magic   clouds   castle   helicopter

Proper nouns

A proper noun tells you the name of one particular person, place or thing.

For example, 'London' is a proper noun because it's a particular place.

Proper nouns start with a capital letter.

Freddie
Japan
Mars
Professor Pink
Wednesday
Texas

Proper nouns include...

• people's names

Lauren
Archibald
Dr Brown

• places, countries, continents

Tokyo
Australia
Asia

• days, months, festivals

Saturday
August
Christmas
Diwali

10

Nouns

Nouns are words like 'Amy', 'tiger' or 'book' that tell you the name of a person, an animal or a thing. Ideas and feelings, like 'truth' and 'sadness', are nouns as well.

Most sentences contain at least one noun and a single sentence can have many nouns.

There are six nouns in this sentence.

Ryan had a dream that his rabbit was on a voyage through space in a rocket.

Proper nouns

Proper nouns tell you the name of one particular person, place or thing.

'Paris' is a proper noun because there's **only one** Paris.

Proper nouns always start with a **capital letter**.

I'm proper.

Paris

Superman   Christmas
Mexico   Elvis

Common nouns

You use a common noun when you're **not** talking about a particular, unique thing.

'Penguin' is a common noun because there are **lots** of penguins.

Common nouns **don't** have a capital letter unless they come at the beginning of a sentence.

I'm common.

penguin

cake   table
laughter   star

Figure 3. Organization of contents in publications (4, right)[9] and (7, left)[10]

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a preview of the page can be seen on the video review of the book available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acnvs9sq27o&t=13s (accessed February 2023).

9   Reproduced from *Junior Illustrated Grammar and Punctuation* by permission of Usborne Publishing, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, UK. www.usborne.com. Copyright © 2016 Usborne Publishing Limited.

10   Reproduced from *First Illustrated Grammar and Punctuation* by permission of Usborne Publishing, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, UK. www.usborne.com. Copyright

Figure 4. "How to use this book" sections in publications (4, right)[11] and (7, left)[12]

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Most of the reference materials are quite interactive. They include activities, usually enclosed in visually well marked dedicated sections on the page which, the younger the learner, are more similar to those found in illustrated activity books. Figure 5 shows two examples from two Usborne publications, *First Illustrated Grammar and Punctuation* and *Junior Illustrated Grammar and Punctuation*. The former is meant for children younger than those served by the latter.

Figure 5. Activities from publications (7, top)[13] and (4, bottom)[14]

Among the books marked as reference materials, especially interesting in terms of format and interactivity are publications (1) and (8), which are meant for a very young readership. They are both lift-the-flap picture books. They introduce only the very basic metalinguistic concepts, but they do so in an entertaining fashion, which requires the reader to interact with the books. In this sense, they exploit strategies that contribute to the communicative dimension of knowledge transfer, rather than to the cognitive one, that is, strategies that

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13 Reproduced from *First Illustrated Grammar and Punctuation* by permission of Usborne Publishing, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, UK. www.usborne.com. Copyright © 2019 Usborne Publishing Limited.

14 Reproduced from *Junior Illustrated Grammar and Punctuation* by permission of Usborne Publishing, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, UK. www.usborne.com. Copyright © 2016 Usborne Publishing Limited.

involve readers and create a trusting relationship with them (Turnbull 2018). *The Great Grammar Book* is richly illustrated and includes a wide range of interactive activities that help young children make sense of the concepts introduced. It features lift-the-flap pages, but also more creative pages. Two examples are the page explaining what verbs are and the page introducing prepositions. The former includes a wheel that can be turned to see the characters perform some of the actions described. A rabbit personifies the part of speech and tells the reader what to do with the wheel (i.e., "Hi, I'm Vera Verb! Don't stop! Keep moving! Verbs are doing words"). The latter includes a pop-up scene which recreates the story narrated in the text and exemplifies prepositions of space (Fig. 6) (e.g., "out of the gate"; "through the hole").

Figure 6. Two pages from *The Great Grammar Book*[15]

Similarly, Usborne *Lift-the-flap Grammar & Punctuation* offers young children many opportunities for discovery. In this case, the flaps usually hide examples or additional information. Thus, in the section dedicated to nouns (p. 2), children learn that "A SINGULAR noun stands for just one thing" and "A PLURAL noun stands for *more* than one thing" through the verbal explanation, but their attention is also channelled through the use of capital and italic fonts, as well as the picture of "one beaver" (with the singular form 'beaver' written in blue) and the picture of "lots of beavers" (with the plural form 'beavers' written in blue) and in small print the additional information that "Most plurals end with an S" connected to the main information by an arrow. The beavers are represented on a flap which, once lifted, unveils the rules governing the morphology of plural nouns as well as the existence of irregular nouns (e.g., 'child' >> 'children'). The use of visual elements in these materials is very interesting for young readers, because it often serves the function of exemplifying abstract or complex concepts, such as the notions of 'comparative' and 'superlative', which are rendered with the pictures of three cakes of growing size and the adjective 'delicious' marking the first, and the comparative and superlative forms hidden under the flaps corresponding to the mid-sized cake and large cake.

Perhaps the most interesting example of the way in which the non-verbal component completes and enhances the verbal component in the dataset is represented by the units dedicated to explaining what 'grammar' means. Most books meant for younger children, resort to visual elements to create a visual metaphor of language as a system, and grammar as the "glue" which keeps all the different elements together. Discussing in detail all the examples would exceed the limits of the present discussion, but two cases are especially interesting. The first one is taken from the DK *Visual Guide* (p. 8). The unit opens with a question (i.e., "What is Grammar?") followed by a short text that explains that we use words when we talk and that "Grammar is the way we put these words together so that they make sense". Another line of text, below the main definition of grammar, explains that "words scattered around on their own don't mean very much" and below this line, several words appear on what looks like the scattered pieces of a puzzle. This visual metaphor is made explicit immediately after, in a short paragraph claiming that "Words are like pieces of jigsaw. We need to fit them properly together to make meaning". In an image which follows, the pieces of the puzzle with the corresponding words are organized neatly in a line which now makes sense.[16]

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16 We could not obtain permissions to reproduce fragments of publication (5), DK's *Visual Guide to Grammar and Punctuation*, in time for the submission of this article. However,

Similarly, in the Usborne *Lift-the-flap Grammar & Punctuation*, 'grammar' is defined on the very first page as "a set of rules for organizing words into sentences. Each word has its own job to do" (Fig. 7).
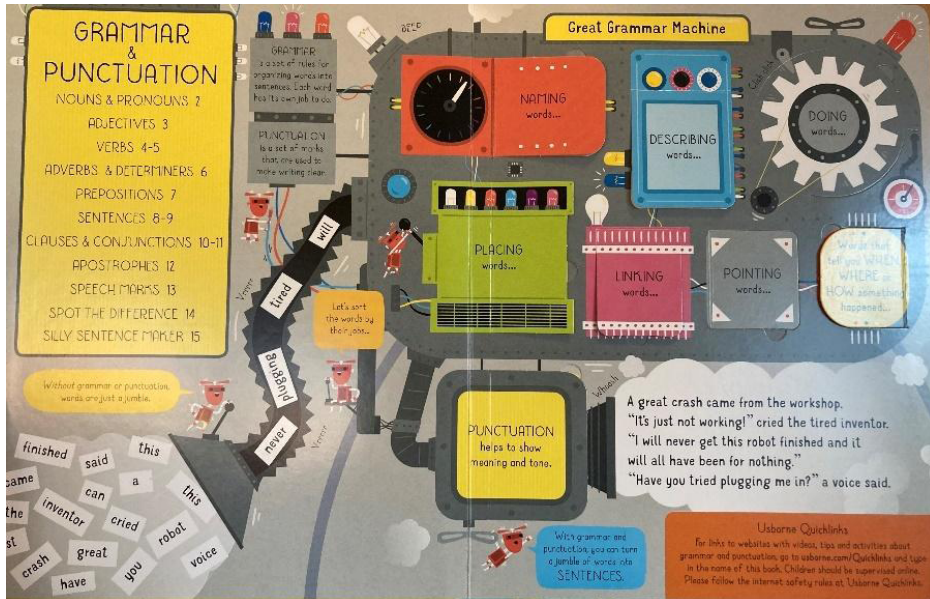

Figure 7. The Great Grammar Machine, Usborne *Lift-the-flap Grammar & Punctuation*[17]

This text appears in a small box on the top left-hand side of a large illustration depicting a machine, "the Great Grammar Machine", in which each flap corresponds to a type of word defined in terms of its function in the system. The actual term is hidden under the flap, together with examples. Thus, in the machine are featured "naming words", "describing words", "doing words", etc. which are then explained through denomination under the flap with statements like "These are known as NOUNS", "These are known as ADJECTIVES" and "These are known as VERBS". Scattered words are represented at the input point of the machine and punctuation is at the output point, because it "helps to show meaning and tone" of the different

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a preview of the page can be seen on the video review of the book available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acnvs9sq27o&t=15s (accessed February 2023).

[17] Reproduced from *Lift-the-flap Grammar and Punctuation* by permission of Usborne Publishing, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, UK. www.usborne.com. Copyright © 2020 Usborne Publishing Limited.

combinations of various types of words organized by the great grammar machine. The illustration represents in an accessible way the contemporary view of language as a complex system in which different parts contribute to the creation of meaning by interacting in a systematic way. In other words, this is a brilliant visual metaphor of one of the most fundamental notions in linguistics, which is made immediately understandable through the integration of verbal and visual resources. Moreover, this strategy is suitable to explain such a complex concept to learners who lack even the most basic linguistic notions.

The interplay between the visual and verbal components is also exploited in the third type of materials included in the dataset: narrative teaching materials. This type of material is meant for young learners and proposes an alternative approach to the teaching of grammar terms. The *Grammar Tales* series is published by Scholastic. The two books analyzed as an example of this genre are *A Verb for Herb* focusing on the concept of verb, and *Chicken in the City*, focusing on the concept of noun. Small textboxes present the concepts in a traditional style throughout the booklets. The illustrations, however, are used in an interesting way: not only do they depict scenes of the story that is narrated in rhymes at the bottom of the page, but often complement and expand the concepts presented as on p. 2-3 of *A Verb for Herb*, in which the verbs jumping out of the fairy's bag exemplify the concept at issue.[18] In other words, illustrations are complementary to the text (Roth et al. 2005) and represent a case of augmentation, i.e., they provide additional meanings to those derived by the text (Martinec – Salway 2005; Unsworth 2006).

The use of narration with a didactic purpose is certainly not a new idea, but the application of narration to the presentation of grammar metalanguage is an innovative attempt to make linguistic terminology accessible and interesting for young learners. Like game-like activities and interactive strategies, it contributes to the communicative as well as the cognitive dimension of knowledge transfer. *Punctuation, the Write Stuff* is grounded in similar theoretical premises, even though illustrations only accompany the large-font text, on separate pages, providing a visual summary of the textual content discussed in section 4.1 rather than complementing or enhancing it.

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[18] We could not obtain permissions to reproduce fragments of publication (16), *A Verb for Herb, Grammar Tales*, Scholastic – US Office in time for the submission of this article. However, a preview of the pages mentioned can be seen on the video review of the book available at https://youtu.be/sYV-X9B6dWE?t=71 (accessed February 2023).

5. Concluding remarks

In the light of the discussion in sections 3 and 4 above, we can reasonably conclude that grammar teaching represents a peculiar case of knowledge transfer. Children know the subject matter well: they just need to give a name to the building blocks of such matter, i.e., to learn the specialized terminology to describe language and how it works. In this sense, they operate in a way which is not too different from what linguists do. They learn to observe linguistic production and give a name to linguistic phenomena, so that they can describe how the system works. For this reason, there is no real "recontextualization" in grammar knowledge transfer to children. However, much reformulation is necessary when it comes to explaining abstract grammatical metalanguage to young learners who might well know the language but might also lack the cognitive skills to process such information. The effort to meet the needs of this readership is evident in the strategies adopted in the materials investigated, which are similar to those observed in the popularization of different types of specialized knowledge. For this reason, it seems fair to conclude that grammar teaching and reference materials can be investigated within the wider framework of the studies on "edutainment" (Aksakal 2015) and of knowledge dissemination and popularization for young readers.

   The analysis has shown that both verbal and visual resources are exploited to make grammar metalanguage understandable for children, although in different ways in the different books included in the corpus. Books for older learners rely more on text, especially reference materials for Year 5 and up. In the latter, visual resources, including layout, formatting, and font style, are often relegated to the role of attention catching strategies. The younger the readership, the more integrated verbal and visual resources are in the presentation of relevant concepts, with a noticeable difference in innovation and creativity between teaching materials and reference and narrative teaching materials. Overall, although the books included in the dataset adopt a functional approach to grammar learning as a means to speak and write "better" English, most popularizing strategies are exploited in teaching what parts of speech are and do, and to recognize them.

   Although the presentation of metalinguistic concepts relies largely on text, even in the more traditional publications (e.g., workbooks), the effort to offer intermodal access to what is assumed to be difficult to grasp for children is evident, although to a different extent. This indicates

that grammar metalanguage is treated as specialized terminology in popularizing materials.

Multiple semiotic resources are especially exploited for exemplification and explanation, although the integration of language and images varies greatly in the dataset. In some cases, text and visual elements simply co-occur, but in other cases, e.g., in some of the most creative materials for young learners, they are complementary and either extend or complement each other. This is the case of some interesting visual metaphors which offer a concrete representation of complex and abstract concepts (e.g., language as a system of interacting structures). Multimodality is also exploited to anchor grammar metalanguage to familiar concepts and experiences (e.g., grammar as a jigsaw or verbs like a constantly turning wheel). This attempt to adjust to pre-existent knowledge, familiar concepts and cognitive skills of the readership is in line with what has been observed in the popularization of different scientific contents for children, as well as the effort to provide instruction through entertainment.

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