

Grammar Texts and Consumerist Subtexts

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Abstract

While several checklists exist for the evaluation of ESL/EFL textbooks, none includes suggestions for looking for specific biases, especially those found in the content of examples and sample sentences. Growing awareness in publishing has reduced problems in the presentation of gender-based and racial biases in most ESL/EFL grammar textbooks, but socio-economic bias still persists. This article looks at example sentences taken from several recent grammar textbooks, and discusses the potential impact of socio-economic bias and the promotion of consumerism in these books.

Introduction

When instructors or program administrators select grammar textbooks, typically, the first thing we check is the table of contents. Mostly likely, from book to book, we'll find similar topics covered in a familiar order: Present Tense of *Be*, Regular Verbs, Demonstratives, Regular Past Tenses, etc. We then most likely thumb through the text to examine the types of exercises, the way the grammar topics are presented and explained, and in general, how suitable the text is for our given student population.

One way that teachers are encouraged to evaluate textbooks is by using a checklist; a number of different checklists are available. Many of these appear exhaustive—one often-cited checklist developed by Byrd (2001), for example, covers three pages. An earlier article (Williams, 1983), presents a 7-category,

28-point checklist for textbook evaluation. A shorter checklist can be found on the Center for Applied Linguistics *Digest* website (Garinger, 2002).

These checklists often focus on the use of structures, exercise types, illustrations, and instructor guidance. Examples from these checklists follow:

Structure

1. stresses communicative competence in teaching structural items
 2. provides adequate models featuring the structures to be taught
 3. shows clearly the kinds of responses required in drills (e.g. substitution)
 4. selects structures with regard to differences between L1 and L2 cultures
- (Williams, 1983, p. 255)

Exercises

1. Do the exercises and activities in the textbook contribute to learners' language acquisition?
 2. Are the exercises balanced in their format, containing both controlled and free practice?
 3. Are the exercises progressive as the students move through the textbook?
- Etc.*
(Garinger, 2002, n.p.)

Illustrations

1. Do illustrations create a favorable atmosphere for practice in reading and spelling by depicting realism and action?
 2. Are the illustrations clear, simple, and free of unnecessary details that may confuse the learner?
 3. Are the illustrations printed close enough to the text and directly related to the content to help the learner understand the printed text?
- Etc.*

(Byrd, 2001, p. 425)

Unfortunately, no mention of evaluating texts for racism, sexism, economic bias, or other stereotypes or bias, exists in any of these lists.

However, by looking at these sample texts and example sentences, particularly in older textbooks, we can sometimes find examples of bias, factual error, or similar problems.

- a. The pretty old salesgirl sold me the hat.
- b. The invalid looked out the window.
- c. The starlet is charming.

(Example 1. Sample sentences from an English grammar book, 1968) [1]

Of course, careful book selection should also include an inspection for bias. Reading selections, dialogue topics, and even illustrations and photos can present biases of different sorts. But, what about example sentences? Grammar texts, by necessity, are filled with them. They are often viewed as mere vehicles by which a particular structure is correctly illustrated, rather than as a purveyor of content. In fact, the content of these examples might not be considered at all.

Fortunately, most recently published books are scrutinized by editors and publishers, so that examples such as those in Example 1 are not included in today's grammar textbooks. Instead, care is taken to ensure that diverse cultures are represented, gender-based bias is minimized (see for example, Hartman & Judd, 1978; Rifkin, 1998), and of course, that the texts are accurate and fair. One area in which such scrutiny does not seem to be applied, however, is the area of socio-economic bias and the promotion of a consumerism.

Socio-economic Bias and Consumerism

What is meant by socio-economic bias? Simply, the privileging, omission, or stereotyping of particular socio-economic classes. In textbooks, this is common in the frequent, nearly default, portrayal of middle-class or upper-middle class pursuits as the norm. Participants in example sentences, for instance, all seem to take vacations, travel nationally or internationally for leisure purposes, play tennis and golf, and buy new cars and jewelry. In other words, consumerism in textbooks is tied to the portrayal of the middle or upper class as the global norm; in addition, it is further complicated by the promotion of certain brand

names of goods, or the act of buying itself.

The following examples of socio-economic bias and consumerism are taken from recent ESL grammar texts. These examples are not taken from contextualized discourse samples, but stand as individual sentences exemplifying grammatical structures (discussion follows the examples).

- a. The rings are small but expensive.
- b. That is a beautiful car.
- c. The best color for a new car is red.
- d. Do you have a green sports car?
- e. They go to Florida every summer.
- f. Of all the restaurants, he likes McDonald's best.

(Example 2. Sample sentences from an ESL grammar book, 2001)

- a. I prefer the Ford Mustang.
- b. Your mother drives a sports car, doesn't she?
- c. I hope to go to Italy next fall.
- d. They advise us not to travel by bus.
- e. Those cars are brand new.
- f. My watch is new.

(Example 3. Sample sentences from an ESL grammar book, 2006)

- a. She has some money.
- b. Maria wears a lot of jewelry.
- c. Sonya is wearing some silver jewelry.
- d. I need some money.
- e. Where did you buy those shoes?

(Example 4. Sample sentences from an ESL grammar book, 1996)

- a. I shelled out a lot of money on the diamond engagement ring that I bought for her.
- b. After the game, he gulped down the entire bottle of Coke in no time.
- c. It even has a nice swimming pool that we'll be able to use in the summer.

(Example 5. Sample sentences from an ESL grammar book, 2006)

- a. I bought a new car last month.
- b. Let's go to the shopping mall.
- c. You went to Paris last year, didn't you?
- d. Where did you go on vacation last summer?
- e. She's thinking about buying a new house.

(Example 6. Sample sentences from an ESL grammar website, accessed 2007)

Discussion

In fairness, it must be pointed out that these examples do not represent a preponderance of the type of sample sentences found in any one textbook. On the other hand, they are not isolated cases; each of the textbooks cited above (and no doubt, countless others) include numerous example sentences like those shown above. Nevertheless, we should look at certain aspects of these examples, and the messages they may convey.

Socio-economic bias

Swimming pools, diamond rings, and trips to Paris sound like feature stories on the old television program *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. However, reference to these items in example sentences is common in today's grammar texts. Interestingly, these kinds of examples have not always distinguished English grammar books. Perhaps not surprisingly, example sentences found in a Depression-era English textbook are more likely to include sentences such as these:

- a. The farmers were very much disheartened because they received only low prices for their tobacco.
- b. Butter and eggs are dear this winter.
- c. At the beach you can get good rooms cheap.

(Example 7. Sample sentences from an English grammar book, 1932)

Indeed, sample sentences appear to be products of the times in which they are written. However, they need not reflect cultural aspects of the times that are objectionable, or that carry messages that work counter to the classroom learning environment. Materials writers should be cognizant of these types of biases and work to eliminate or qualify them. Consumers of English grammar materials should look closely at grammar textbooks for evidence of socio-economic bias.

Consumerism

People of all socio-economic brackets go to the mall, buy shoes, and need money. The examples above are not intended to suggest that only wealthier populations practice these activities. However, the focus on money and shopping in grammatical examples ties into a socio-economic concept of creating a culture of desire: the desire to shop, go to malls, and to buy things. And, of course, these sample sentences escalate the shopping experience by introducing shopping for sports cars, jewelry, and new houses, things out of reach for a large portion of the world's population, ESL/EFL students included. The impact of creating a consumerist culture is discussed in the conclusion to this article.

Brand-name Promotion

It has been argued that the inclusion of brand names is more authentic than a presentation of generic consumer goods. Lee (2000), again speaking of Korean textbooks, contends: "Western images and representations such as MacDonalds [sic], Pizza Hut and Coca Cola are omitted even though they are parts of Korean culture in New Times" (n.p.). However, the uncritical inclusion of references to brand names can also be seen as promoting those brands, not merely showing them as cultural phenomena. In the case of Coca Cola (Coke), for example—while its global dominance is obvious, it is not without controversy. Using Coke as a "default" reference for a soft drink in a grammar example belies the company's impact on local economies and the drink's health effects. This is in addition to its being privileged above other brands, including local brands, such as Inka Cola in Peru, or Salaam Cola, a halal cola available on the west coast of the U.S. The same criticism can be said of referring to McDonald's, Nike, Microsoft, Sony, or in fact, any other brand name, when it is used to represent an entire class of goods.

A special comment should be made about Example 3d, as it does not fit into

any of the categories of discussion above. In fact, the statement, "They advise us not to travel by bus," could simply mean that traveling by bus takes too long, or is too expensive, or too difficult. However, in the context of other sample sentences telling of the purchase of new cars, of mothers who drive sports cars, and the best colors for new cars, the advice not to take the bus takes on a potentially insidious tone.

Conclusion

Socio-economic bias in textbooks has been noted in discussions of various textbooks in general, but not, to my knowledge, in reference to ESL/EFL textbooks, or grammar books specifically. In discussing elementary school textbooks, O'Donnell (quoted in Grant & Grant, 1981, p. 64), for example, reports: "too many of the... books are still being dominated by stories of middle socioeconomic [sic] class children." Lee (2000) notices the same issue in language textbooks in Korea: "[T]extbooks stand for the ideologies and interests of the upper/ middle class, and urban residents, while marginalising those of lower class, rural residents or fishery workers" (n.p.).

Why is this a problem in ESL/EFL grammar textbooks? Christopher Flavin, president of Worldwatch Institute states, "[U]nprecedented consumer appetite is undermining the natural systems we all depend on, and making it even harder for the world's poor to meet their basic needs" (cited in Mayell, 2004, n.p.). More to the point, perhaps, as Lee (2000) concludes, "[T]extbooks biased toward middle class and wealthier elites may alienate students of the lower classes, who cannot see themselves in these pages" (n.p.). It is certainly the case that students in many of our ESL/EFL classrooms, those whose populations include recent immigrants, refugees, or the working poor, may have difficulty finding themselves in the worlds created by current grammar textbooks, a world whose inhabitants buy new cars, travel to Paris, and exchange expensive jewelry as gifts.

It is a leap to suggest that example sentences grammar textbooks are directly leading to the depletion of the world's resources, or are alienating entire groups of students because of the mention of Coca Cola, or the idea that one might buy a sports car. But, the promotion of consumerism, the elevation of a lifestyle that thrives on new cars and international vacations, in any form, must be examined for its value and place in the grammar textbook, and by extension, our classrooms. In our evaluation of grammar textbooks, we must look at more than the table of contents or the instructor's manual. We should be reading those seemingly innocent sample sentences and asking, "What is *really* being

taught here?"

Note

[1] The titles and authors of the textbooks are not cited here, as this article is not intended as a review or critique of any particular grammar textbook. Instead, the purpose is to illustrate relevant examples and trends in grammar books.

About the Author

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