Is grammar more like vocabulary?

In this article **Alan Maley** shows that it is becoming difficult to separate grammar from vocabulary

Until recently we have assumed that grammar and vocabulary were quite different.

Grammar = a smallish set of rules which would yield correct sentences.

Vocabulary = a memory system for storing and retrieving large numbers of lexical items.

Aitchison (1) quotes approvingly, 'I must confess I have always been more impressed by the capacity of the human brain to discriminate, characterise and store in memory the 30,000 plus arbitrary words in active use than with the complexity claimed to be involved in learning a few dozen syntactic, algorithmic rules'.

But is this true? It seems doubtful. First let us examine some well-accepted characteristics of vocabulary

1 There is a great deal of it! Estimates of how many words (and what is a word?) a native speaker knows (and what does knowing a word mean?) vary between 50,000 and 250,000. That is a lot of words.

2 Vocabulary is highly context-sensitive. The inappropriate use of near-synonyms, such as *large/big*, highlights this. Whereas we can say:
He was a big man in the company.

We cannot say:
**He was a large man in the company.*

Similarly *It was raining cats and dogs* is not appropriately rendered as **It was pouring mogs and hounds.*

The company words keep – their collocations – are an important factor in their overall 'meaning'.

3 We tend to recall vocabulary items holistically from memory store rather than to construct them from rules. Vocabulary items seem to be filed in a whole series of parallel and interconnected storage systems (rhyme, initial consonant clusters, semantic family, collocational range, etc.).

So – what about grammar? Increasingly it looks as if it shares at least some of the characteristics of vocabulary:

1 There is a great deal of it! Far from consisting of 'a few dozen syntactic rules', it seems to become more complex the more it is investigated. This is especially true of the twilight zone where grammar and vocabulary merge into each other. Word choice will often determine grammatical choices. For example, the verbs *give, ask* and *explain*.

We can say:

I gave Mary a book.
I asked Mary a question.
I explained the problem.

But not:
** I explained Mary the problem.*
** I asked a question to Mary.*

Likewise we can say:
Mary was given a book.
Mary was asked a question.

But not:
**Mary was explained the problem.*

There are more 'rules' than anyone thought.

2 Grammar is also highly context-sensitive. Whereas word choice is largely conditioned by collocational contexts, sentence choice is shaped by the sentences which precede and follow.

For example,
John did something with an axe.

can be followed by:
What John did was slice the salami.

but not by:
It was John who sliced the salami.
which has a similar propositional meaning.

It is perfectly possible for us to construct texts full of perfectly correct sentences yet which sound 'odd' because the discourse rules governing the way the sentences hang together have been flouted. This is one of the biggest problems for advanced students in writing.

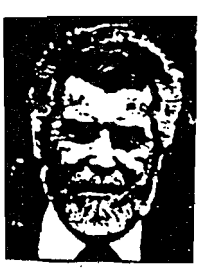
3 Grammar may be as much a question of holistic recall as of rule-governed construction. Even as long ago as 1961 Bolinger was claiming: 'At present we have no way of telling the extent to which a sentence like *I went home* is a result of invention, and the extent to which it is a result of repetition, countless speakers before us having already said it and transmitted it to us 'in toto'. Is grammar something where speakers 'produce' (i.e. originate) constructions, or where they 'reach for' them from a pre-established inventory...?' (2)

The notion that much language is stored as holophrastic chunks (e.g. as a matter of fact) rather than constructed anew from rules each time it is needed is argued strongly in a recent book by Nattinger and de Carrico (3) who also derive some interesting ideas for teaching from their observations.

So from now on is it grammulary and vocammar?

References

1 *Words in the Mind*, Jean Aitchison. (Basil Blackwell 1987).
2 'Syntactic Blends and Other Matters' by Dwight Bolinger in *Language – The Loaded Weapon* (Longman, 1980).
3 *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*, James R Nattinger and Ginette S de Carrico 1992. (Oxford University Press 1992)



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