

Learning Grammar in the XXI Century – Tradition Through Innovation

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Abstract

*This project started in 2003, when we came across a book called *La Grammaire est une chanson douce* by Orsenna. The title intrigued us enough to want to buy it, read it and discover other books, authors and a different way of learning languages using other methods and supports, that we could consider innovative at first glance or even unconventional.*

This was just the first of many books that we discovered and collected in different languages in the last few years, about grammar and linguistic issues and learning, e.g., in non-scholastic and non-scientific approaches, and which are, in the main, complementary books for students (and not only) to exercise, to read at home and when they feel like it, also in the internet, but which affect and complete the study of grammar in school and through life experiences, in a sort of homeschooling.

The present paper presents part of a wider study on a significant number of French and Portuguese books from the first decade of the XXIst century approaching grammar issues in an unorthodox way: through poetry, novels, humor, theater, linguistic games, letters, essays, to mention just a few different strategies and text typologies, based on image and complemented in internet sites, used as sequels of the books, closer to their reader's digital references. We would like to present two examples, a French and a Portuguese, of how this grammar study can be made online and its importance in didactics.

It was always difficult to answer parents what books they should buy to help the students at home. In 2003, when we discovered *La Grammaire est une chanson douce* by Orsenna, we began to find an answer. Just the first of many books we collected in different languages in the last few years, sharing them, books that were published in different countries throughout the world in the last one hundred years, about grammar and learning, in non-scholastic and non-scientific approaches, and which are, in the main, complementary books for students (and not only) to read at home and when they feel like it, but which affect and complete the study of grammar in school and through life experiences.

These books / authors use what we called «metagrammars» (MIRANDA, 2010 : 19-20), because despite their interest on linguistic issues, somewhat like a classical grammar, their approach rejects and mocks the commonly used orthodox approach, changing the accepted representations of grammar in a rather ambiguous way. Some authors include the word «grammar» in their titles, joining an adjective to clarify this other use, one of the strategies used to accentuate this iconoclastic view of grammar.

Of the immense collection of French authors, we should highlight the work of Erik Orsenna, who devoted himself to grammar in four novels : *La Grammaire est une chanson douce* (2001), *Les Chevaliers du Subjonctif* (2004), *La Révolte des Accents* (2007) and *Et si on dansait?* (2009).

As an exemple of Orsenna's approach, in the first-mentioned title, ten-year-old Jeanne and her older brother Thomas happen to be on an ocean liner to America—until the liner sinks in a storm and the kids are washed up on an island forgetting all they knew about French. Monsieur Henri, soon appears and takes the little survivors on a tour of a metaphoric place. Here, words are free, they're living tribes

that occasionally have dealings with each other, sometimes even getting married to words from different tribes, like nouns and adjectives.

All this isn't just fantasy and fun, since Orsenna has some grammar lessons to teach young readers, his target audience. In this tiny French bestseller he imparts these lessons, presenting nouns and articles shopping in stores run by adjectives.

In short, in these narratives, Orsenna takes us on a journey through the French language and culture, using elements of language as characters in a tale divided into four parts that have both didactic and literary objectives. The titles mentioned discuss vocabulary, morphology, syntax, verbal tenses, accentuation and punctuation using adjectives, verbs, diacritics and punctuation marks as personified characters, beautifully illustrated by Bigre! et Montse Bernal.

But Orsenna's innovation spreads over the web. In his site, www.erik-orsenna.com/index.php, young and older readers can practice and exercise language learning through multiple choice exercises, writing exercises, crosswords, for instance as well as reading and comprehension exercises of authentic material.

Insofar as French authors, we must also refer to the works of Reinach, Vieira da Silva and Gueguen, Queneau, Tardieu, Ionesco, Robbe-Grillet, Fasola and Lyant, Chalaron and Roesch, Cavanna, Fournier, Pennac, Detambel, Julaud, Jaskarzec, Bégaudeau, Rambaud, Rivais, Houdart and Prioul, Halba and Gramm, united in their different grammar approaches from 1913 to 2009, and in the tradition in which Orsenna's work also find itself^[1], mainly writers, but also journalists, teachers and grammar experts who are not afraid of having some playful fun with such a serious national symbol as language and normal users with perhaps an oversensitive awareness of and respect for their mother tongue, contributing to disseminate language awareness and reflection possible at home, from a period in which school attendance was not universal, many times provided by mothers, to the present, when school is no longer the only educator.

As for the Portuguese authors (from 1930 to 2010), we will not mention any book in particular, because they are so many, but a recent collection of books on linguistic questions, *Gramofone*, written for students by several well-known names in Portuguese children's literature (Alice Vieira, Margarida Fonseca Santos, António Mota, José Fanha,...) who have a non-conventional way to present these subjects.

These books are lovely objects, colorful and in a user friendly format. Narrative, theater, poetry, puns... are used as vehicles for language reflection and awareness through a complementary strategy, combining reading and writing through metaphors, images, comparisons and beautiful images, transforming these books into objects of pure linguistic and visual delight, together with a classical grammar synthesis on the last pages and exercises on internet, like Orsenna.

This collection of books, in fact, the classical chapters of an orthodox grammar book, continues in an interesting website, www.junior.te.pt/gramofone, in which younger readers may revise the grammar rule, exercise and correct themselves in a very school like manner.

The collection of Portuguese authors on grammar also includes José Jorge Letria, Rosário Alçada Araújo, Gabriela Funk, António Magalhães, José Oliveira Cosme, Júlia Nery, Teresa Rita Lopes, Luísa Costa Gomes, Mia Couto, José Eduardo Agualusa, José Manuel Viegas... all writers as well, and maybe because the approach to linguistic matter is gentle and funny and especially fruitful in poetry and theater for a younger public, it's rejected by language scientists accustomed as they are to a different kind of logic.

In conclusion, we wish to analyze authors who mingled grammar with pleasure, unlike the academic and scientific approaches, and include them in an ancient tradition of active dissemination of knowledge, essential to school and its history since Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, William James,

John Dewey, among others, by means of pleasure (Ben-Shahar) and narrative (Egan), different authors united in common goals : teaching all to everyone, adapting the subject to the needs of the learners involved, wherever they might be, through ICT.

We also aim to analyze linguistic strategies, structure, target readers, texts and paratexts, contexts, objectives, literary genres, in short, language that is used for an informal reflection on language, as a means to reject the weight of science in scholarly terminology, bringing together language, literature, culture and pleasure and hence depict an alternative history of non-conventional methodologies in language learning.

In fact, literary art, in this particular case, grammar, has much to gain by being didactic and democratic, and giving language awareness back to their natural users, in school, out of school, in a flexischool manner: using different text genres: narratives, theater, poetry, essay writing, dialogues, letters, cookery books, detective stories, puns...; teaching and entertaining; using creativity, imagination and humor; choosing a non-specialized language over metalanguage; explaining through comparisons and personifications to deal with abstract notions; mingling cognition with pleasure; rejecting classical grammar language models; promoting self learning through the media and adapting to the reader's needs.

In order to support this rather optimistic view of grammar teaching and learning, we have submitted to a test one hundred pupils from 12 to 18 years old of public schools of Lisbon. Aware of their representations of grammar, studied in mother language and foreign language 1 and 2, we exposed the students to an extract of *La grammaire est une chanson douce* and *Chamem-lhes nomes!*, concerning the nouns and adjectives and tested their knowledge on the subject and the approach they preferred : the classical exercises or Orsenna's. We didn't noticed any significant difference of test results, but 57% of the students believed they learned easier and more pleasantly with a literary approach of grammar, because the metalanguage is in context, is part of a memorable narrative with affective interaction and motivation, especially with younger students. These data depend on many things and mostly on students cognitive profile, but show us the importance of pleasure and motivation while learning, and teaching obviously (MIRANDA, 2010b : 104 sq.).

Some students remarked also that, this way, they could learn by their own or with some in presence family support or non-presence teacher support, if that option was possible. In fact, more and more parents, all over the world are getting involved in their children's education, reinforcing the school's mission and becoming themselves actors in their children's education, through homeschooling or flexi-schooling. Many studies support that this approach encourages maturity, thinking critically and independently, self-control, financial responsibility, self-entertainment, capacity for insight, examining political and commercial statements, developing deep friendships/relationships, training to be leaders and adventurers, encouraging curiosity and questions, giving autonomy to take risks now and then, adventure, resilience, introducing kids to competent adults, sharing roles with classical school systems.

The authors we have been studying do not wish to create methods or replace school in what grammar teaching is concerned. They simply want students to like and know their language in a complementary way to classical learning methods, revising previous knowledge, reflecting on grammar, but also vocabulary, culture, literature: looking differently to grammar and their representations of a strict, dry subject, present everywhere.

If we compare the covers of the books we selected with other grammars, the first reaction is amazement, because of our representations of grammar. The same goes for the texts, who show us a grammar made of people, of intentions and emotions, common uses and special occasions and the amazement goes on, on paper or internet:

Car les mots s'organisent en tribus, comme les humains. Et chaque tribu a son métier. Le premier métier, c'est de désigner les choses. (...). Tel est le premier métier des mots : poser sur toutes les choses du monde une étiquette, pour s'y reconnaître. C'est le métier le plus difficile. Il y a tant de choses et des choses compliquées et des choses qui changent sans arrêt! (...) Les mots chargés de ce métier terrible s'appellent les **noms**. (ORSENNA, 2001 : 71)[ⁱⁱ]

Perguntador: - Quem és tu?

Lápis :- Eu?!

Perguntador: - Sim, tu! Vês mais alguma pessoa aqui ao pé de nós?

Lápis :- Eu sou um nome comum...

Perguntador: - De que género...?

Lápis :- Masculino.

Perguntador: - Não é isso, pá! Estou a perguntar que tipo de nome, percebes? Quero saber se és alguma coisa de jeito... É que isso de seres comum... parece-me muito sem graça.

Lápis :- Enganas-te! Sou um nome comum extraordinariamente importante! Sou o Lápis!

Perguntador: - Que original... Um Lápis...! Queres coisa mais banal do que um lápis? Ainda se fosses Afonso... ou Portugal... ou Humanidade...

Lápis :- Mas aí eu já era um nome próprio...

Perguntador: - Lá está! Muito mais importante! Davas o nome a uma pessoa que é, de certa forma, única!

Lápis :- Mas os nomes comuns são imprescindíveis! Eles estão em todo o lado!

Perguntador :- Que maçada! É que eu ando à procura de um nome colectivo e não há meio de o encontrar...

Lápis:- Não percas a esperança... Mas o que é isso?

Nisto entrou uma multidão perseguida por uma matilha enfurecida e o Lápis e o Perguntador tiveram de fugir do Porto... (SANTOS, 2009 : 11, 12, adapted)[ⁱⁱⁱ]

Because grammar doesn't need to be a burden, but a natural vibrant tool, "a constant challenge"[^{iv}]
we can all win together :

La grammaire est l'art de lever les difficultés d'une langue; mais il ne faut pas que le levier soit plus lourd que le fardeau.[^v]

References

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ⁱ Vide Miranda (2010b) for all the referred authors, French and Portuguese.

ⁱⁱ In this extract, words are seen as different tribes.

ⁱⁱⁱ Someone asks and answers about different classes of nouns and their uses and characteristics.

^{iv} Orsenna (31/03/2011), *Dernières nouvelles d'un nouveau monde en train de naître* - CICLO GRANDES CONFERÊNCIAS, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa.

^v *Grammar is the art of surpassing language difficulties, but the lever shouldn't be heavier than the burden*, Antoine de Rivarol (1753-1801), *Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française* (1784).