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# **Presenting Complex Ideas Using Simple Syntax in Fiction for Low-literate Immigrant Adults**

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## **1 Introduction**

It is widely acknowledged that one becomes a proficient reader by reading; in fact, without engaging in what is variably termed extensive reading, free voluntary reading or reading for pleasure, an individual is unlikely to become a fluent, independent reader (see Krashen 1988, for example). The practice of free voluntary reading (henceforth FVR) is contingent upon the existence of a wide range of fiction and non-fiction materials to suit the interests of a range of emergent readers. For native-speaking children and older native-speakers who for some reason failed to develop into independent readers as children, sufficient materials exist. However, for those adults who had no opportunity to learn to read in their native language prior to migrating to a post-industrialized country (7-15% of all immigrants) where literacy is necessary for full participation in society, the choice of FVR materials is meagre. Such learners face a dual burden (Tarone, Bigelow and Hansen, 2013; Young-Scholten and Strom 2006): they are still in the process of acquiring linguistic competence in the L2 in which they are learning to read without native language reading skills to transfer. Appropriate FVR materials need to be interesting to the adult reader, yet must be written using simple morphology, syntax, vocabulary, phonology and regular orthography. These criteria rule out books written for nearly all other categories of readers. It is surprising that few such books exist, and that, in turn, low-literate adult immigrants engage in little or no free voluntary reading in or outside literacy classrooms (Young-Scholten and Maguire 2009; Young-Scholten and Naeb 2010).

This paper draws on an on-going project whose aim is to produce engaging and accessible short fiction books for adult immigrants. How many books are needed to set up an FVR program? Rodrigo et al. (2007) based their study of an FVR program for 43 native-speaking and ESL adults on a ratio of six books per student; this was feasible given the high level of oral proficiency (for the ESL students) and their reading level of eight to ten year old children. Here a good amount of books exist for adult readers. The aforementioned on-going project aims to produce sufficient books for a classroom of 20 or 30 students. The low-literate adults in question have, as noted above, no native language literacy skills to transfer and therefore begin the process of learning to read in much the same situation as young children. Recent studies have shown that these adults possess the pre-requisites for learning to read that young children possess; tests of their phonological awareness show patterns similar those exhibited by young children prior to development of phonemic awareness and mastery of grapheme-phoneme correspondences in the language they are learning to read (see Young-Scholten and Strom 2006 and Young-Scholten and Naeb 2010 on English and Kurvers 2002 and Kurvers, Stockman and van de Craats 2010 on Dutch). In one important respect many of these adults (particularly those whose progress in reading is slowest) are dissimilar to children: the linguistic competence they have acquired in their L2 is comparable to that of a child half the age at which children start learning to read, namely that of a two year-old. This is particularly evident with respect to morphosyntax where minimal competence correlates with minimal reading skills (Young-Scholten and Strom 2006). In this paper we therefore focus on simplification of morphosyntax in the production of short fiction books for low-literate adults. We first, however, make the case for the necessity of engaging the reader through application of principles of fiction writing.

## **2 Fiction that engages adult readers**

Children's books might seem like a possible choice for reading materials for these adult L2 readers, but in addition to written text that is pitched at the five- and six-year old's level of linguistic competence, there are problems stemming from non-literate adult immigrants' lack of familiarity with the characters and plots that feature in children's books. In FVR, engagement in the reading materials is crucial for progress. When reading independently, for pleasure, if the narrative does not compel the reader to read the next sentence or to turn the next page, s/he will stop and turn to another activity (Birch 2002). The effect of engaging text goes beyond its power to keep the reader on task; when the text draws the reader in, learning new vocabulary while reading is more likely to occur (Coady 1997) and details of the text more likely to be retained (Lee 2009).

In order to write engaging fiction, the writer needs to consider character, story, scene and drama. (See Wilkinson and Young-Scholten 2011.) The protagonist must be someone the reader cares about. S/he must have a desire, one which is plausible for its context, so the reader can buy into it. Interest is enhanced if the desire is strong, and the stakes are high. In terms of structure, stories have a beginning, middle and end. The beginning establishes the main character's desire. In the middle, obstacles prevent the protagonist from fulfilling his/her desire. This can be drawn out, with obstacles mounting, and when this occurs, the desire becomes stronger in response as the story progresses. The reader's sympathy for a character is heightened with each mounting obstacle. At the end, something has changed for the character, though not necessarily fulfillment of that desire. Thus the story starts with a status quo which is disrupted by a 'trigger' (which could be anything, from a change in the weather to a murder) that alters the character's circumstances. It is this change of circumstance that creates a desire. In the end, the protagonist's circumstances, relationships, understanding/world view will have changed. Final surprises and twists of narrative (reversals) enhance the reader's experience upon completing the book.

Writing in scenes creates immediacy and draws the reader in. This involves focusing on what the character does in time and place, and requires both more effort from the writer as well as from the reader who thereby becomes more engaged with the text through making inferences. Writing in scenes encourages the writer to say less and imply more because the action is described moment by moment as it occurs. This discourages the writer from summarizing events for the reader, interpreting events for the reader, and/or coming to conclusions for the reader. The reader must do these things for him/herself. Adjectives and adverbs are used sparingly because they impede the reader's personal visualisation of the situation and characters. The advice given to new writers is Show, don't tell. Note that this advice reduces linguistic complexity.

Providing the reader with incomplete information, or delaying the release of information, is a technique used to keep the reader turning the page in order to find this information. While the argument could be made that this is too cognitively challenging for low-educated immigrant adults, all adults constantly make inferences during interactions with others, and emergent readers simply need to transfer to written text what they automatically do during speaking. The need to read more deeply into a text, and to make inferences from a vast wealth of life experiences, is thus also appropriate for adults who are emergent L2 readers.

Requiring the reader to make inferences is particularly effective through the use of direct speech/dialogue. Good dialogue is brief and under-written and turns out to be simpler than reported speech or no speech. Spoken language is linguistically simpler than written language, in a range of respects not the least of which is use of present tense which in turn keeps the action vivid and immediate. As we shall see, use of dialogue interfaces very well with the need to make fiction for these emergent readers linguistically accessible.

### 3. Linguistically accessible fiction

#### 3.1. Simple text

The objective is text that the emergent L2 reader can process quickly enough to comprehend it. Readers who are just beginning to sound out words require mono- or bisyllabic words composed of CVC syllables. These should be regularly spelled words, and if the orthography is opaque, with a range of irregular spelling patterns (as in Danish and English), any irregularly spelled words should be those high frequency words which are already in readers' sight word repertoires. The writer can exploit readers' awareness of syllable, onset and rhyme through rhyming and alliteration, and text can be repeated for literary effect, resulting in poetic prose. Vocabulary should consist of concrete verbs, nouns (and only where necessary, adjectives and adverbs) relevant to readers' lives; 98% of the vocabulary used in a fiction book should be known by the reader (Hseuh-Chau and Nation 2000). The requirement that most words be known by the reader is one that should be taken seriously. While the verdict is perhaps still out on whether one can learn vocabulary through reading, i.e. implicitly, the goal of reading for pleasure is first and foremost building the reading stamina of emergent L2 readers.

With respect to discourse, there should be considered use of the devices involved in text cohesion (Whiteside 2008) such as pronouns. Finally, the syntax should be that of canonical word order, in English SVO, and sentences should be single clause. Functional morphology should be eliminated to the extent that this is possible while maintaining grammaticality. As noted above, the low-educated adult immigrants who make the slowest process in learning to read in their L2 are those with very low oral proficiency. These are learners at the lowest stages of morphosyntactic development.

#### 4. Early stages in the acquisition of morphosyntax

In considering morphosyntactic accessibility, it is necessary to step back and consider the level of the target readership. This entails looking at the explanations that have been offered for children's and adult L2 learners' earliest multiword utterances. The utterances under scrutiny are single-clause utterances typically consisting of only lexical morphology, with no grammatical elements (or elements identifiable as such), optional subjects and

no displacement of constituents; typical examples of such utterances are known as Root Infinitives (Rizzi 1993/4), Optional Infinitives (Wexler 1994), or as Root Defaults (Paradis and Crago 2001). Some have claimed that these early multi-word combinations do not reflect a syntactic system, e.g. Bickerton (1984), Givón (1979), and Slobin (1985) for L1 acquisition. But this creates a continuity problem in L1A (Pinker 1984): how does the learner move from a non-syntactic to a syntactic system? Others have claimed that the early system is syntactic, but a principle/constraint needs to mature, e.g. Radford (1990): all functional projections mature at once for the L1 child. Other maturational ideas in L1 acquisition include Rizzi (1993/4) (the young child lacks the adult's requirement that CP always be projected) and Schütze 1997; Wexler 1994; Wexler, Schütze and Rice 1998 (TP is optionally projected until a certain point in maturation; see also Wexler (1998, 2000, 2003) on the Unique Checking Constraint). However, Ko, Ionin and Wexler (2010) steers away from maturation.

In German one most clearly observes a relationship between the position of the verb and whether it is finite or non-finite: non-finite verbs follow other sentential material for L1 children at early stages and this is also evident in L2 acquisition. In addition, the word order of the learner's native language VP transfers at the start: head-initial (i.e. verb before other material) for Italian in example (1) of Concetta (ages 12;4 and 13;5/L1 Italian; data Pienemann 1981)) and in example (2) head-final for Korean and Turkish (data Vainikka and Young-Scholten 1994).

- 1a. Nicht lesen  
(Ich lese nicht.)  
not read-INF  
'I won't/don't want to read.'
- b. Hier gucken der Geld  
(Er guckt hier das Geld an.)  
here look+at-INF the money  
'Here he's looking at the money.'
2. hier jacke ausmachen (Changsu/Korean)  
here jacket off.make-INF  
(Sie macht (zieht) ihre Jacke aus.)  
'(She) is taking (her) jacket off here'
3. ja alles hier kaufen (Memduh/Turkish)  
yes everything here buy-INF  
(Ja, ich kaufe hier alles.)  
'Yes, (I) buy everything here.'

In L2 English, a transferred head-initial VP is evident when the L1 VP is head-final (see also Haznedar 1997/L1 Turkish; Mobaraki, Vainikka and Young-Scholten 2008/L1 Farsi)

Jun (time 1; time 2, 19 months later/L1 Japanese); data from Yamada-Yamamoto 1993)

- 4a. bread eat
- b. bananas eating
- 5a. eating banana
- b. wash your hand

In second language acquisition, various Full Transfer/Full Access or Full Access views maintain that the learner's L2 system is syntactic from the start, and furthermore that the full CP tree is available from the start (functional morphology is learned). Most work in generative syntax has assumed sentences to be maximally uniform in terms of structure whereby all sentences in all languages have fully projected functional structure (Culicover and Jackendoff 2005; see e.g. Cinque 1999; 2010 on separate projections for individual adverbs and adjectives). Uniformity is also assumed across stages of language development. Culicover and Jackendoff note that syntactic theories simplify principles or simplify structures. Minimalism (Chomsky 1995, 2001, 2008) simplifies principles. Based on studies of immigrant adults learning German and English in immersion contexts in which they received little or no instruction, Organic Grammar simplifies structure and relaxes the Uniformity Assumption. In OG, only lexical syntax or the bare VP is projected early on. This stage accounts for the earliest grammars in typical and atypical L1A and in L2A. Under Organic Grammar (Vainikka and Young-Scholten 2011) both L1 and L2 learners engage in structure building; functional projections are posited by the learner based on UG, on X'-Theory in response to evidence in the input from the language being acquired (Structure Building (Vainikka and Young-Scholten 1994; 1996). For similar views in L2A see Bhatt and Hancin-Bhatt

2002; Hawkins 2001; Myles 2005; Prévost 1997; 2003). Organic Grammar takes both syntax and acquisition into account in equal measure; acquisition of morphology and syntax are intertwined given that the syntax of a language is connected to its functional morphology (e.g. inflections such as those for agreement, tense, case marking and bound anaphors or question particles). Functional projections are organized as the VP-group, the IP-group (alternatively, the TP-group), and the CP-group, and acquired in this order by L1 and L2 learners. For each group, there is a set of possible grammatical features that can be realized as specific functional projections - if and only if the input provides evidence for it (see Vainikka and Young-Scholten to appear). Under this approach, the language acquirer has, in some sense, all the information about all the functional projections in the languages of the world available to him/her, but the actual realization of specific functional projections involves finding the relevant evidence in the input for whether or not to posit a particular projection, as well as determining whether all features involve separate projections or whether some of them are grouped together.

Functional (or grammatical) projections play a major role in syntax in forming the backbone of the structure of any sentence, but much uncertainty in the fields of syntax and acquisition concerning the identity, nature, feature content and possible development of these projections. At the heart of the debate over functional projections in acquisition is the basic question of whether these projections are acquired at all, or whether they are always present in the learner's grammar. Do functional projections or categories as such have any meaningful existence of their own, or are they just clusters of features or feature matrices, as in much of current Minimalist theorizing (Chomsky 1995, 2001, 2008). Lardiere (2009) points out that it is unclear what the acquisition of functional projections means anymore; does development (Hegarty 2005), development involve acquisition of features one by one making notions of 'parameter' and 'functional category' empty in terms of acquisition research and syntax? We believe that the data reveal the acquisition of each functional projection at a time, supporting the idea that functional projections truly exist; see Vainikka & Young-Scholten 2012 for details. Under Organic Grammar, acquisition (of English or German) proceeds as shown in (6)

(6) VP → NegP → TP → AgrP → CP

VP: (non-finite) verb and its (optional) arguments

NegP: sentential negation

TP: productive tense distinctions (although not necessarily fully target-like), verb raising

AgrP: subject-verb agreement and obligatory subject pronouns

CP: embedded clauses with complementizers; complex questions

*Table 1: Organic Grammar (Vainikka and Young-Scholten 2005; Young-Scholten and Ijuin 2007)*

STAGE	1a	1b	2	3	4
Order in declaratives	L1 word order, then from 1b onwards, target language word order				
Verb type	Main verbs only	Main verbs; copula is	Main verbs, modals, new copula forms	Main verbs, modals, and copula forms beyond is; range of auxiliaries expands	
Main verb inflection	None	Very little	Some tense and aspect forms	Productive tense, aspect and agreement	
Subject pronouns	Absent	Begin to emerge	More forms; subjects optional	Subjects obligatory; there; existential it emerge and become productive	
Complex syntax	None	Single clause sentences; only formulaic or intonation-based SVO questions	Conjoined clauses; questions are still formulaic or without inversion	Simple subordination; questions may still be without inversion	Complex subordination; questions with inversion.

L2 learners at the VP stage (1a and 1b in the table above) produce non-target questions, but under the Uniformity Assumption, these would involve a full CP. Indeed the prototypical syntactic structure for a question

is a CP projection; a prototypical structure for an indicative statement is at least an IP-level projection. We now turn to where techniques of fiction and Organic Grammar meet to very nicely serve our emergent readers.

## 5. Engaging dialogue in accessible fiction

The gist of the advice to the writer is to understate in order to require the reader to infer a range of information from that text. Linguistically simple text is more likely to achieve this than text that is, in various ways, linguistically complex. One technique that can be used is ellipsis. Use of ellipsis turns out to be a means of adhering to the principles of fiction while producing text that is on the one hand grammatical for the teacher and other speakers whose linguistic competence is more advanced yet on the other represents the bare VP stage of the immigrant adult readers. However, we will argue for an alternative interpretation of ellipsis that categorizes such utterances together with those produced by learners at the VP stage.

Culicover and Jackendoff (2005; Ch.7) argue that various constructions in English cannot and should not be derived from full sentences. These constructions include the following types of utterances, undeniably part of the English language and produced according to rules of English (word order, morphology etc.):

- 7a) Salutations: [= their [2g]]  
Hey, Phil!  
Excuse me, doctor.  
Hi there, handsome!  
Yoohoo, Mrs. Goldberg!
- b) How about [XP]: [=their [2e]]  
How about a cup of coffee?  
How about a little shorter? [said by a hairstylist]  
How about going to the movies?  
How about we have a little talk?
- c) NP Pred! (Shopen 1972) [=their 2d]  
Seatbelts fastened!  
Everyone in the car!  
Books open to page fifteen!
- d) NP and S (Culicover 1972): [=their 2h]  
One more beer and I'm leaving.  
One more step and I'll shoot.  
Fifty years of generative grammar and what have we learned?

These and other related constructions share the following properties, according to Culicover and Jackendoff: (a) they typically do not show tense or even a verbal element – to posit a full underlying sentence, one would need to posit an abstract verb which is subsequently deleted; (b) they cannot be embedded except as direct quotes. C and J conclude that a better theory treats such constructions as consisting of something less than a sentence. The grammar appears to allow positing grammatical objects that can be something less than a sentence – phrases, or even concatenations of phrases.

Using their approach (but the Organic Grammar analysis), we might say that (7b) involves a WH-phrase consisting of a WH-word and a PP, equivalent to the WH-phrase in “[Where on the table] would you like me to set it?”; i.e. the structure might be [Adv[+wh] PP]. The construction in (7c) might have a small clause structure [DP XP], while (7d) could involve coordination between a DP and a CP [DP and CP]. The salutations in (7a) might involve the concatenation of an element Interjection and a DP (or NP), [Interjection NP]. According to C and J, each such utterance can be thought of as being an instance of U [utterance] which subsumes the category S (or CP, for sentence).

Given C and J's conclusion, we are then also in a position to treat elliptical constructions such as Bare Argument Ellipsis (2a) [their [1a]] or VP-ellipsis (2b) [their [1g]] as perhaps consisting of something less than a sentence, as CandJ proceed to argue:

- 8a) A: What did Pat buy?  
B: A motorcycle
- b) A: Who wants to come along?  
B: I do!

According to C and J (p.233) "...if machinery exists that accounts for the interpretation of a fragment of one type, without appealing to covert syntactic structure containing the fragment, then that machinery is available for all types of fragments and constitutes the default hypothesis." C and J go on to develop a system whereby syntactic objects that are not overtly full sentences can be generated, and the "missing" parts are interpreted in a way that could be thought of as anaphora (the antecedent is either in the preceding discourse or in the non-linguistic context). Syntactic features (such as case marking) are inherited from the antecedent, or from the relevant position in the antecedent clause.

An influential approach to L1 acquisition theorizing has been Rizzi's (1994) Truncation idea, namely that the topmost functional projections can be omitted by language learners, as well as sometimes by adults. However, many of the elliptical constructions discussed by C and J do not readily fit into this analysis (e.g. salutations, the 'how about' construction, etc.). The difference between Rizzi's approach and C and J's approach seems to be that Rizzi would assume that a full CP is projected, and then one can omit projections – while C and J would assume that one only projects what one needs.

Following C and J's general approach, then, there is presumably a grammar that speakers of English have that contains the information about which types of fragments are possible in the language, and which are not. Probably any maximal projection (DP, PP, AdvP, AdjP, VP, TP, CP...) is a possible fragment. In addition, concatenations of at least two phrases are possible, with or without the conjunction 'and', as C&J show.

Organic Grammar is in line with C and J. The learner does not project a full CP but can only 'pronounce' part of it. Rather, at the earliest syntactic stage, only a bare VP is syntactically projected. Fiction can be written which exploits the fact that the fragments shown above and in the dialog below do not include more syntax than the learner has acquired. The conversation shows adults produce various types of reduced structure. The correlation between syntactic structure and the corresponding pragmatics does not always hold. Given a situation where A is wrapping and B is acting as the assistant, consider the rough syntactic and pragmatic analysis of each utterance.

(9)

	<i>Actual syntax</i>	<i>Implied syntax</i>	<i>Implied pragmatics</i>
A: Could I have that yellow ribbon, please?	CP [interr.]	VP [imperative] ['Give me...']	polite request for action
B: This one?	DP + inton.	CP [interr.]	request for info ['Do you mean...']
B: Here. [handing ribbon]	Adv(P)	TP [indic.] ['Here you go.']	offering item
A: See? [lifting finished package]	V(P) + inton.	VP [imperative]	request for action ['Look at this!']
B: Want this next?	TP + inton.	CP [interr.]	request for
A: Which one?	DP + intonation	CP [interr.]	request for info

## 6. Conclusion

Where dialog is used as one of the techniques to produce fiction that requires the reader to make inferences, it turns out that text can be produced that reflect the learner's early stage of morphosyntactic development. This enables the writer of fiction for such learners to write text that is both grammatical and natural, yet also accessible.

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