On the Plausibility of Functionalist Approach to Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract–One of the linguistic approaches to the study of second language acquisition is the type of linguistics which stresses the role of language as focusing on meaning conveyed in different situations. This perspective to language acquisition is concerned with the ways in which second language learners set about making meaning, and achieving their personal communicative goals. In other words, language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on a conversation and syntactic constructions develops out of conversations. This article concentrates on the social aspects of language learning and expatiates on the systemic functional linguistics.

Keywords – Systemic Functional Linguistics; Functionalism; Functional Grammar; Learner Interlanguage; Second Language Acquisition.

The Prague School of Linguistics

In the realm of linguistics, one of the prominent figures who brought about the shift from diachronic to synchronic analysis, as well as for introducing several basic dimensions of semiotic analysis that are still important today, such as syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis is the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. The fundamental dimensions of linguistic organization introduced by Saussure are still basic to many approaches to how the phenomenon of language can be approached [3]. Although Saussurean linguistics is the predecessor of the Chomskyan linguistics and Halliday's view to language, this paper makes attempts to spotlight the type of linguistic perspective resulting from the Prague school.

The Prague school is the name given to the views and methods of the linguistic circle of Prague and the scholars it influenced. The circle was founded in 1926. Its main emphasis lay on the analysis of language as a system of functionally related units, an emphasis which showed Saussurean influence. Since the 1950s, Prague School ideas have been received and developed, particularly with reference to the syntax, semantics and stylistics of English and Slavonic languages. The particular aspect of this view is the formulation of a theory of functional sentence perspective, wherein sentence analysis is seen as a complex of functionally contrastive constituents [6].

The Prague linguistic conception has two designations which are both equally important and both emphasize what is new in the Prague School. First of all, it is structuralism; i.e. the Praguians introduce into linguistics the problems of structure, the problem of how language is shaped, and how its parts are related to each other. Second, it is to be pointed out that Prague linguistics is functional, where the term function means a task. The linguists belonging to the Prague School saw an essential feature of language systems in the functional tasks of language, in its practical application. They stressed not only the importance of the relations existing within language systems but also the relations of language systems and language utterances to extra-lingual reality. It is worth mentioning that the stress laid on the functional aspect of language implied also attention to the relations between language and thinking [25].

Systemic Functional Linguistics

Firth was a British linguist who began laying the groundwork for a social approach to language. During 1950s, Halliday greatly developed Firth's ideas in distinctive directions of his own. Halliday went on to construct an elaborate and ambitious framework which eventually came to be called Systemic Linguistics (SL). SL is a functionalist approach to language, and it is arguably the functionalist approach which has been most highly developed. In contrast to most other approaches, SL explicitly attempts to combine purely structural information

with overtly social factors in a single integrated description. Like other functionalist frameworks, SL is deeply concerned with the purposes of language use [9].

Historically, there was a move against Descartes's rejection of the body and perception, so that functional linguistics recognized, perhaps not the body, but definitely human activity. In the twentieth century, both functional linguists and Soviet psychologists such as Vygotsky elevated the role of activity, a move which pleased the Marxists with their emphasis on labor [5]. Searle developed the speech act theory, the aim of which was to locate and describe the basic types of illocutions in a systematic taxonomy [22]. Within the tradition of British analytical philosophy, Austin's [2] cognitivist notion of performative utterances or operative utterances emphasizes the fact that "a person does something as well as simply saying something" (p. 223). Austin distinguishes between locutionary acts and illocutionary acts. Harris [13] defined locutionary acts as the utterance of utterances and the illocutionary acts as the ones we perform in uttering some utterances.

Austin [2] explains that "the more we consider a statement not as a sentence (or proposition) but as an act of speech, the more we are studying the whole thing as an act" (p. 20). Elsewhere, he holds that to make certain utterances is to perform the action, an action which one could scarcely perform, at least with so much precision, in any other way. The act of doing something is inseparable from the act of saying something. Thus, for Austin, the linguistic behavior of a person is more significant than any formal structures of systemic functional linguistics uses a technical and extensive meta-language to describe the functions and metafunctions of language. McGuire [16] states that language is a tool, as linguistic communication is behavioral, and symbols elicit behavioral responses. Conversation is a transaction and a negotiation. Language as a tool is represented by Vygotsky's activity theory and Halliday's systemic linguistics. Davidse [7] explains Vygotsky's idea in this regard and states that "a tool is not a simple hand-held hammer or paintbrush, but a modern, technologically complex tool. Functional linguistics adds a sociological dimension to scientific linguistics, as it emphasizes the instrumental character of language and stresses that language is not a self-sufficient entity (p. 40). Along the same line, Warnick [27] says that "it accordingly focuses on the speaker's strategy and purpose rather than on the process by which speaker and audience share meanings and develop possibilities for common experience" (p. 250).

In an effort to be a system, like Saussure's scientific language, McGuire [16] states that systemic functional linguistics excludes contingent speech and the person who is speaking. Lemke [15] holds that "although it rescues language from the state of being a pure science and relates language to everyday use by having recourse to sociological theory, functional linguistics, like the natural sciences, seeks to compile taxonomies of language use rather than to explicate the experience of speaking and interacting. Rather than pertaining to a community of individuals of various ages and personalities, its sociology is impersonal, universal and standardized. In this way, Halliday's systemic linguistics tries to describe the linguistic differences associated, not with different communities of speakers, but with different activities in social life so that our uses of language are inseparable from the social functions, the social contexts of actions and relationships in which language plays its part" (pp. 26-27).

According to Halliday and Matthiessen [12], in a systemic grammar every category is based on meaning, rather than being a formal grammar which is autonomous and therefore semantically arbitrary. In the same line, Kilpert [14] regards cognition as a social semiotic rather than as a system of the human mind, and so puts less emphasis on the individual. And Atkinson [1] follows the discussion, stating that it sees meaning more as a social process and has, in other words, a sociocognitive approach to language. Despite its pragmatic uses, functional linguistics, which is only one of many views of language, excludes bodily self-expression and consciousness, and is also based on the monetary/goods exchange model of capitalism, whereby information is exchanged and tasks are performed without regard for their inherent value or meaning. Thus, the commonality of functional linguistics with the Saussurean text as commodity is exposed.

Halliday [10] employed this model for "analyzing language in terms of the interrelated systems of choices that are available for expressing meaning. Basic to the approach is the notion that language structures cannot be idealized and studied without taking into account the circumstances of their use, including the extralinguistic social context. From this functional view, language acquisition needs to be seen as the mastery of linguistic functions. Learning one's mother tongue is learning the uses of language, and the meanings, or rather the meaning potential, associated with them. The structures, the words and the sounds are the realization of this meaning potential. Learning language is learning how to mean" (p. 345).

To relate this notion to the question about what second language learners acquire, Halliday[11] states that "it is not a system of rules which govern language structure, but rather meaning potential, what the speaker/hearer can(what he can mean, if you like), not what he knows" (p. 346). Elsewhere, Halliday [11] holds that "the process of acquisition consists of mastering certain basic functions of language and developing a meaning potential for each" (p. 33).

Grounded upon what Halliday [11] stated concerning functions of language, it can be stated that there are three distinctive functions of language (or metafunctions): Ideational, Textual, and Interpersonal. The ideational (or

experiential) function is the conveying of semantic content representing information about our experience of the external world (including our own minds). The textual function is the linking of linguistic elements to other linguistic elements, so that the various parts of a text can be integrated into a coherent and cohesive whole and related to the wider context of our speech or writing. The interpersonal function is the establishment and maintenance of social relations, including persuading other people to do things or to believe things [26].

Systemicists stress the utility of their framework in the analysis of texts, an area beyond the scope of many other approaches, and they accordingly devote more attention to the treatment of texts than to the analysis of isolated sentences. Because of this preoccupation with texts, the concepts of coherence and cohesion play a central role in the framework. And SL has proven useful especially in the fields of stylistics and critical discourse analysis. Halliday and his followers have recently been applying the name Functional Grammar to the more explicitly grammatical aspects of SL, and the term systemic functional linguistics has also been used [24].

Functional Grammar versus Formal Grammar

As mentioned earlier in the paper, functional grammar was the name applied to the more explicitly grammatical aspects of SL, and the term systemic functional linguistics has also been used. Functional grammar is a linguistic theory which was devised in the 1970s as an alternative to the abstract, formalized view of language presented by transformational grammar, and relying instead on a pragmatic view of language as social interaction. The approach focuses on the rules which govern verbal interaction, seen as a form of co-operative activity, and on the rules (of syntax, semantics and phonology) which govern the linguistic expressions that are used as instruments of this activity ([9]; [6]).

Functional grammar is different from traditional school grammar in focusing on language as a meaning making resource rather than as a set of rules, and in recognizing the link between the linguistic choices of speakers and writers and the contexts those linguistic choices help realize. The functional linguistic perspective sees the language system as a set of options available for construing different kinds of meanings. Although the language as a whole offers a broad set of options, each speaker may be aware of only some parts of the total set, based on that speaker's experiences. Unfamiliarity and lack of social experience with the way language is used in school, rather than the intrinsic cognitive challenges of the content or subject matter, may underlie the difficulties many students experience in schooling. Recognizing the socially constructed nature of the language of schooling also enables us to see that it can be taught and learned [21].

Functionalist View to SLA

It is to be pointed out that functional models of analysis date back to the early twentieth century, and have their roots in the Prague School of linguistics that originated in Eastern Europe. They differ from structuralist and early generative models by emphasizing the information content of utterances, and in considering language primarily as a system of communication rather than as a set of rules. The term function has several meanings in linguistics, including both structural function (such as the role which elements of language structure play as a subject or object, or as an actor or goal) and pragmatic function (what the use of language can accomplish, such as convey information, control others' behavior, or express emotion) [23].

Functionalists view language primarily in terms of its use in the context of situations, focusing on meaning conveyed in different situations. In functional studies of second language acquisition, researchers are concerned with the ways in which second language learners set about making meaning, and achieving their personal communicative goals. In other words, language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on a conversation and syntactic constructions develop out of conversations. In SLA, meaning-making efforts on the part of learners are a driving force in an ongoing second language development, which interact with the development of formal grammatical systems [18].

Approaches to SLA which are characterized as functional differ in emphasis and definition but share the following characteristics in general opposition to those in the Chomskyan tradition [23]

1. Focus is on the use of language in real situations (performance) as well as underlying knowledge (competence). No sharp distinction is made between the two.

2. Study of SLA begins with the assumption that the purpose of language is communication, and that development of linguistic knowledge (in L1 or L2) requires communicative use.

3. Scope of concern goes beyond the sentence to include discourse structure and how language is used in interaction, and to include aspects of communication beyond language [23].

Based the afore-mentioned statements, it should be said that the functionalism is an approach to the description of language structure which attaches importance to the purposes to which language is put. Many approaches to linguistics focus entirely on the purely structural characteristics of languages, ignoring the possible functions

of language. The shift from a product to a process orientation in the analysis of interlanguage has led researchers in the field to look at how learners map form-function relationships [17]. There have been two lines of studies to analyze the relationship between form and function in the acquisition of L2. Some claimed that learners begin with forms and some claimed that learner begin with functions [18].

However, it seems that both form-to-function and function-to-form analyses are needed to understand the process of second language acquisition [17]. Therefore, McLaughlin [17]holds that researchers require" to look at how forms are mapped onto functions and how functions are mapped onto forms" (p. 74). The functional approach has the advantage of indicating how it is that beginning second language learners express functions in a language in which they have limited syntactic and lexical commands of it. Further, in functional studies of SLA, researchers are concerned with the ways in which second language learners set about making meaning, and achieving their personal communicative goals [18].Further, Ellis' [8] argument that second language acquisition involves the sorting out of form-function relationships assumes that the learner begins with forms. Ellis notes that analyses are needed to examine in detail how forms acquire new functions and lose old ones as they are mapped onto the exact functions they serve in the target language.

McLaughlin [17] states that second language data shows evidence of the acquisition of function without the acquisition of form. For example, it is argued that language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on a conversation and that syntactic constructions develop out of conversations. Rather than assuming that the learner first learns a form and then uses that form in discourse, it is assumed that the learner first learns how to do conversation, how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction, syntactic forms develop. Ninio [19] states that "the argument is made that conversation precedes syntax, or syntax emerges from pragmatics" (p. 433).

One application of Halliday's model to the study of SLA comes with seeing L2 learning as a process of adding multilingual meaning potential to what has already been achieved in L1. Saville-Troike, McClure, and Fritz [20] stated that "second language acquisition is largely a matter of learning new linguistic forms to fulfill the same functions [as already acquired and used in L1 within a different social milieu" (p. 60).

The Scope of the Functionalism in SLA

The functionalist perspective appeared as one of the stabilized traditions in the studies of second language acquisition theory. Mitchell and Myles [18] refer to the fundamental claim of this perspective and state that "language development is driven by pragmatic communicative needs, and that the formal resources of language are elaborated in order to express more complex patterns of meaning. Functionalist research typically takes the form of naturalistic case studies of individuals or groups of learners; most often these have been adults in the early stages of second language learning, who are acquiring the language in informal environments rather than in the classroom" (p.154).

Functionalism and Interlanguage

Since the scope of this perspective is quite vast, a paramount issue of second language acquisition has been chosen to be examined based on the functionalist view to language learning. One of the issues that the functionalism has worked on is the interlanguage system. Functional approach to learners' interlanguage is concerned with the ways in which second language learners set about making meaning and achieving their personal communicative goals. It is argued that the great variety of interlanguage forms produced by second language learners cannot be sensibly interpreted unless we also pay attention to the speech acts that learners are seeking to perform, and to the ways they exploit the immediate social, physical and discourse context to help them make meaning. Further, it is argued that these meaning-making efforts on the part of learners are a driving force in ongoing second language development, which interacts with the development of formal grammatical systems [18].

Mitchell and Myles [18] criticize the formal system for being still in an underdeveloped state. They state that "functionalism has demonstrated the wide range of devices (lexical and pragmatic as well as formal) which interlanguage users deploy in order to convey meaning. For example, the expanded treatment by functionalist researchers of the semantic notion of temporality has taken the study of how interlanguage users locate their utterances in time, well beyond a search for formal sequences in verb morphology development. The aspect hypothesis has suggested how learners may use overlaps in word meaning and morphological form as an entry point into various formal subsystems of their target language" (p.155).

But even functionalism has some limitation concerning the issue of interlanguage system. In this regard, Bardovi-Harlig [4] states that the limitation on functionalists' characterization of interlanguage is that most attention has been paid to the earliest stages of development. It is remarked that the interlanguage of more advanced learners has been explored thoroughly in some areas only (e.g. the development of reference to past time and the use of past-tense verb).

Mitchell and Myles [18] state that functionalist approach to SLA insists on the gradual nature of interlanguage development and syntacticization, with learners working actively on only part of the system at any

one time, but with possible reorganizational consequences that may spread widely through the system. At the same time, a patch approach in this perspective has been adopted, working on overall utterance structure when studying the basic variety, or alternatively exploring development within a range of semantic and formal sub-systems (modality, space, pronouns, and articles). Linkages across these different sub-systems are not always clear, though it is argued consistently for a multi-level approach to the analysis of IL data. The lexical level has also been studied, from the point of view of its relationship with the development of both morphology and syntax. While their contribution at a descriptive level has been very strong and varied, however, the contribution of functionalist studies to the explanation of IL development has so far been limited. It has been clearly shown how effective a basic variety can be in meeting immediate communicative needs. But it is not well established that communicative need is the prime driver for syntacticization and development beyond the basic variety. Functionalism has also focused largely on the analysis of learners' interlanguage output, paying relatively less attention to input and even to interaction.

Conclusion

The twentieth century witnessed many changes in the domain of linguistics and language teaching. One of these changes was the functional models of analysis which had their roots in the Prague School of linguistics. There exist some differences among structuralism, generative models, and functional models. Functionalism emphasizes the information content of utterances, and considers language primarily as a system of communication rather than as a set of rules. Functionalism concentrates on the use of language in real situations as well as underlying knowledge. Thus, it can be stated that there is no sharp difference between performance and competence. But in the generative model, these two are differentiated. According to functionalism, the study of second language acquisition begins with the assumption that the purpose of language is communication, and that development of linguistic knowledge (inL1 or L2) requires communicative use. Last but not least, the scope of functionalism in the acquisition of language goes beyond the sentence to include discourse structure and how language is used in interaction, and to include aspects of communication beyond language [23].

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Vitae

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