Applied Linguistics to Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Unit 3: The Object of Knowledge in Foreign Language Courses

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Main issues of this unit

- The formalist/structuralist trend (Bloomfield and structuralism/Chomsky and formalism).

- How has the formalist/structural theory of language affected foreign language teaching practices.

- The functionalist trend (Hymes, Halliday).

- How has functionalism affected foreign language teaching practices.

Grammar and linguistic theory (1/2)

Prescriptive Grammar:

Grammar is a collection of rules concerning what counts as socially acceptable and unacceptable language use. These rules in question primarily concern the proper composition of sentences in written language.

- Don't start a sentence with a conjunction.

- Don't end a sentence with a preposition.

- Don't use sentence fragments.
  e.g. Over there is the guy who I went to the party with.

Grammar and linguistic theory (2/2)

Descriptive Grammar:

Rules of descriptive grammar have the status of scientific observations, and they are intended as insightful generalizations about the way that human language is used in fact, rather than about how it ought to be used.

- Articles precede the nouns they belong to.

- Relative clauses follow the noun that they modify.

- Prepositions precede their objects.

Structural theory of language

- Derives from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (who studied the principles governing the structure of living languages) in the early 20th century and mainly the work of the American linguist Leonard Bloomfield.

- Bloomfield (1933) was the first to study language in a very systematic, rigorous and highly scientific manner. He wanted linguistics to become an empirical and descriptive science. His book (Language) dominated linguistic thinking for over 20 years.

Main features of the structural theory of language (1/2)

- Structural linguistics studies the place and distribution of units within a linguistic system with little reference to meaning and use.

- It attempts to identify and classify features of sentence structure i.e. analyse sentences into their constituent parts.

- **Constituent**: a grammatical unit which is part of a larger grammatical unit.

  - e.g., sentence = noun phrase + verb phrase;
    noun phrase = determiner + noun;
    "subject", "verb", "determiner" and "noun" etc. are constituents.

Main features of the structural theory of language (2/2)

- It focused only on instances of spoken language (parole) and analysed them into their constituent parts from sound, morphemes, word to sentence and attempted to discover the patterns and regularities between the parts (i.e. focus on phonology and morphology).

- Sentences were analysed out of context (autonomous linguistics).

Formalism and Chomsky (1/3)

- Chomsky (1957) attacked structuralism and his linguistic theories created a revolution in linguistic enquiry and proved to be a turning point in 20th century linguistics.

- Chomsky's theories still focused on the formal properties of the language and he was the first to focus on another level of linguistic enquiry – syntax.

Formalism and Chomsky (2/3)

- Chomsky starts from the observation that although different groups of people speak different languages, all human languages are similarly governed by common rules, or principles, that are **universal.**

- Chomsky believed that language is a rule governed system. Any language has an finite set of rules, knowledge of which enabled the native speaker to produce an infinite number of sentences.

- The linguist's task is to discover this finite set of rule which had a generative, productive power (transformational/generative linguistics).

Formalism and Chomsky (3/3)

- Chomsky made the distinction between a native speaker's **competence** (knowledge of linguistic rules that enabled the NS to produce grammatically correct sentences) and **performance** (actual use/production of language by the native speaker).

- He believed that the task of the linguist is to discover and analyse competence and not performance since the latter was contaminated and impure. This distinguished his theory from structuralists who focused only on spoken language.

The structural/formalist influence on language teaching (1/2)

- American structuralism had an immense impact on language teaching and led to the development of the structural syllabus which was used in the audiolingual method.

- Structural syllabi focus on grammar, phonology and lexis. They consist of grammatical structures which are sequenced from simple to complex for language learning purposes.

The structural/formalist influence on language teaching (2/2)

- **Basic assumption**: Language can be broken into discreet elements/units which should be learnt one by one. When all units have been learnt in this linear fashion, learners will be able to synthesise all the discreet units and use language as a whole.

Criticisms against structuralism

- Structuralism/formalism shared the belief that language can be idealised and studied without reference to its use and context.

- It neglected that fact that language is used for communication, it is always used in a social context and features of this context affect our linguistic choices.

The Functionalist trend

Linguists mainly from Europe sharing a more social view of language and being influenced by fields such as sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, pragmatics and anthropology **believed that language cannot by studied in isolation but only in relation to its user and the social context in which it is produced**.

Main features/assumptions of the functional theory

- Many linguists have contributed to the development of the functional theory of language e.g. Malinowski, Labov, Firth, Austin, Searl, Hymes, Halliday.

- Main assumption: language varies in different social circumstances and the language we use will depend on various parametres of the communicative situation (roles of participants, topic, purpose of communication, setting, channel).

Functionalism and Hymes

- Hymes (1971) attacked Chomsky's conception of competence. The native speaker does not only have knowledge of abstract grammatical rules but also knowledge of rules of appropriacy i.e. the native speaker knows when to speak and when not, what to talk about with whom, when, where and in what manner.

- "There are rules of use without which rules of grammar will be useless"

- He expanded Chomsky's concept of competence and coined the term communicative competence to include the types of knowledge a native speaker has.

Functionalism and Firth and Halliday (1/2)

- Firth and Halliday advocated that language is used in order to do things (speech acts/functions).

- **Firth**: the things we do with the language are called **speech acts** and the forms we use to accomplish such acts are dependent on the sociocultural context.

Functionalism and Firth and Halliday (2/2)

- **Halliday**: The linguistic system is a sociolinguistic system and there is integration of the uses to which language is put (**functions**) and the patterns of grammar and vocabulary. We use language to express ideas (ideational function) to organise texts (textual function) but also to participate in communicative acts taking on roles and expressing and understanding feelings, attitudes and judgments (interpersonal function).

Functional Language Theory:
A Summary

- Language is a **social action**. Successful communication is dependent not only on the production and comprehension of grammatically correct sentences but also on whether it is **contextually meaningful and appropriate** and whether it did what the speaker **wanted** it to do.

- Language is a system for the communication of meaning and depending on the meanings we want to express and the roles/relationships of interactants, the topic, the setting, the channel we choose the appropriate linguistic forms.

So...

- Functional language theory is a theory of language centred around the notion of **language function**. While the theory accounts for the syntactic structure of language, it places the function of language as central (what language does, and how it does it), in preference to more structural approaches, which place the elements of language and their combinations as central. FLT starts at **social context**, and looks at how language both acts upon, and is constrained by, this social context.

Impact of functional language theory on language teaching (1/2)

- The functional language theory had an immense impact on syllabus design and language teaching in the 70's.

- The concept of communicative competence gave the communicative approach its name.

Impact of functional language theory on language teaching (2/2)

- Language teaching could become more useful and relevant to student needs, by analysing the speech events the students would be involved in, breaking up these events into functions and then identifying the forms that were need to realise those functions (the notional/functional syllabus).

How linguistic trends are reflected in current course books (1/2)

- Although the linguistic trends of structuralism and functionalism are in opposition, current textbooks include categories from both trends (i.e. grammatical structures, vocabulary and notions and functions).

- This mish-mash of categories has to do with the popularity of traditional grammar and has nothing to do with a theoretically informed view of language.

How linguistic trends are reflected in current course books (2/2)

- Whether this blending of categories actually reflects how language is used and helps the learner to use language in everyday communication is another matter….

References

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End of Unit

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Notes

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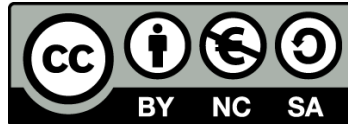
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