A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO SLA: GIVON'S FUNCTIONAL-TYPOLOGICAL SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

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Introduction

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 (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). In other words in this view, language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on a conversation and syntactic constructions develop out of conversations. In deed, Givon's (cited in Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991) in his 'functional-typological syntactic analysis' claims syntax comes from properties of human discourse. This paper draws on Givon's theory of 'syntactization' in which speakers and linguistic systems move from a discourse-based, pragmatic mode of communication to a syntactic mode. It concludes L2 learners need to be scaffolded with functional use of the language in the process of second language acquisition.

Background

In the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, Blackburn (1996) defines 'function' based on logic and mathematics as a map or mapping, that associates members of one class with some unique member of another class. In SLA, the map is between form

and potential meaning (here called function). In other words, 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 (Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

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 (McLaughlin, 1987). 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 (Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

However, it seems that both form-to-function and function-to-form analyses are needed to understand the process of second-language acquisition (Long & Sato, cited in McLaughlin, 1987). "That is, researchers need to look at how forms are mapped onto functions, and how functions are mapped onto forms" (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 74). The functional approach has the advantage of indicating how it is that beginning second-language learners express functions they express in their native language - such as temporality - 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 (Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

Form-to-function Analysis

Huebner's (cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004) work is a good example of form to function analysis in the acquisition process. One of the features he examined in his

learner was the use of the form *isa*. This form derived from the standard English and was used initially to mark topic-comment boundaries. For example, the subject said, 'what I do everyday *isa* water the plants and what I eat for breakfast *isa* bread and butter'. This initial usage served a specific function and acted as a discourse marker rather than a copular verb. That is, the form identified a discourse boundary. Only later did the learner begin to use the form in its copular verb function in various syntactic structures.

Further, Ellis's (1985) argument that second-language acquisition involves the sorting out of form-function relationships assumes that the learner begins with forms. He is correct in noting 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.

Function-to-form Analysis

Some researchers have argued that second-language data shows evidence of the acquisition of function without the acquisition of form (McLaughlin, 1987). Hatch (cited in McLaughlin, 1987), for example, has 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, Hatch assumed that the learner first learns how to do conversation, how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction, syntactic forms develop. The argument is made that conversation precedes syntax, or "syntax emerges from pragmatics" (Ninio, 2001, p. 433). Specifically, in building a conversation with an adult and later with his peer (vertical construction), the child establishes the prototypes for later syntactic development (horizontal construction)

(McLaughlin, 1987).

To do conversation, the child has to learn to call the partner's attention to very concrete objects or actions. Once a child nominates a topic, the partner has a limited number of possible replies. Hatch (cited in McLaughlin, 1987) gave the example of the child pointing to a fish in a fish tank. The adult conversational partner could say: “What's this? It’s a fish; Where’s the fish?; Whose fish is that?; Is that yours?; How many fish are there?; What color is the fish?; What’s the fish doing? He’s swimming; Can he swim? No, it’s not a fish” (pp. 75-76). By questioning and responding in this way, the adult is prompting the use of specific syntactic constructions by the child.

It seems the process is the same in first and second-language learning. When a teacher asks a question or speaks in the target language, he or she is in essence asking or speaking about constituents to be filled in slots. By filling in these grammatical slots, the learner gets practice in applying the rules of the language. Hatch’s argument is that the learner’s initial need is to interact through language, and that by learning how to interact in conversation first- and second language learners acquire vertical then horizontal (syntactic constructions).

Further, researchers working with guest workers in Europe have noted that their subjects often expressed temporality via other means than verb morphology (Dittmar, 1981). Rather than using past endings and auxiliary forms, some subjects used temporal adverbs such as ‘yesterday’ to mark past time. Past tense verb forms did not occur in the learners’ speech. But, learners did have techniques for expressing temporality.

Native speaker: What did you do yesterday?

Learner: Yesterday, I play ball.

In the meantime, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) assert a substantial body of

functionalist interlanguage research has drawn upon the work of Givon (1979; 1981; 1983; 1984; 1985).

Givon as a Functional Linguist

MacWhinney (1986) points out "theories of acquisition can succeed only if they are illuminated by rich understandings of the nature of human language" (p. 2). Moreover, Langacker (cited in Byrnes, 2005) considers the functions that language serves are foundational and they are not merely subsidiary to describe language forms.

In Givon and Malles' (2002) account, language, just as mind and brain, is the product of biological evolution. That is, the rise of human language is a gradual, adaptive extension of pre-existing mental capacities and brain structures. Givon (2009, to be published) tackles syntactic complexity as integral part of the evolution of human communication. He surveys two grand developmental trends of human language: diachrony, the communal (collective-vertical) enterprise directly responsible for synchronic morpho-syntax; and ontogeny, the individual endeavor directly responsible for acquiring the competent use of grammar. He compares the beginning of syntactic complexity along these two developmental trends in second language acquisition, in pre-grammatical pidgin and in pre-human communication.

In Givon's (2005) view, context is the core notion of pragmatics, and it is a framing operation that has been well known since the beginning of the philosophy. He introduces the context of social interaction and communication as a mental representation of other minds. Givon (cited in Lozowski, 2007) mentions one fundamental functionalist assumption: that language (and grammar) can be neither described nor explained as an autonomous system.

Givon's functional-typological syntactic analysis

A substantial body of functionalist interlanguage research has drawn upon the work of Givon (cited in Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Givon's goal as mentioned earlier is a unified theory of all kinds of language change, including language acquisition. To this end, he has developed an approach called 'functional-typological syntactic analysis', which is functionalist in its view that syntax comes from properties of human discourse, and typological in its consideration of a diverse body of languages, not simply a single language or language family. He claims that syntactic change is driven primarily by psycholinguistic and pragmatic principles relating to speech perception and production in face-to-face interaction. These principles are themselves derived from more underlying human perception and cognition.

Although 'functional-typological syntactic analysis' was first developed in the study of historical language change, specially diachronic syntax; Givon claims that it can be applied to all situations of language variation and change, including synchronic variation in adult speech, the development of pidgins and change, child language acquisition and second language acquisition. In all of these situations, he claims, speakers and linguistic systems move from a discourse-based, pragmatic mode of communication to a more syntactic mode. This process of 'synacticization' operates over a number of features, mentioned in table 1. In other words, features of the pragmatic mode mark early interlanguage.

Table1: Givon's notation of syntactization (cited in Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991)

Pragmatic mode features ⟶

Syntactic mode features

(a) topic-comment utterances	(a') subject-predicate utterances
(b) relationships among propositions shown by simple juxtaposition or by linking with conjunctions relativization	(b') relationships among propositions shown by grammatical devices, e.g. use adverbial clauses, complementation,
(c) slow speech	(c') rapid speech
(d) single intonation contours govern short utterances	(d') single intonation contours govern long utterances
(e) higher ratio of verbs to nouns, more use of simple verbs	(e') lower ratio of verbs to nouns, more use of complex verbs
(f) grammatical morphology absent	(f') grammatical morphology present

Therefore, in Givon's (cited in Ellis, 1994) view syntax is inextricably linked to discourse-it is a dependent, functionally motivated entity in the sense that its formal properties reflect its communicative uses. The two modes mentioned above, in fact are distinctions between two types of language, the loose structures found in informal / unplanned discourse, which constitute the 'pragmatic mode' and the tight, 'grammaticalized' structures found in formal/planned discourse, which constitute the 'syntactic mode'. An example of the former is the topic-comment structure of an utterance like: 'Ice cream, I like it'. While an example of the latter is the subject-predicate structure of an utterance, like: 'I like ice cream'.

In functional-typological syntactic analysis, acquisition is characterized by syntactization (the gradual move from a pre-grammatical to a grammatical mode). However, adults retain access to the pre-grammatical mode, which they employ when the conditions are appropriate. Other aspects of language-such as the historical evolution of languages and creolization-are also characterized by the same process of syntactization.

In other words, Givon and Yang (1997) hypothesize that in early L2 acquisition, vocabulary and grammar compete for memory, attention, and

processing capacity. Because one can communicate with vocabulary in absence of grammar but not vice versa, they propose that learners receiving simple input would acquire vocabulary more efficiently than learners challenged with the dual task of acquiring vocabulary and grammar simultaneously. Furthermore, once vocabulary-processing skills were automated, learners would acquire grammar more rapidly.

In summary, Givon (cited in Klein, 1986) has argued that both informal speech and learner speech convey meaning through a relatively heavy reliance on context, whereas more formal styles of language rely on more explicit language coding , with reduced dependence on contextual meaning. For Givon, these pragmatic and syntactic modes are the ends of a continuum, rather than discrete categories. For each language, and indeed each communicative situation, a specific balance of the two modes is maintained. Colloquial speech, for instance, is dominated by the pragmatic mode, while carefully planned written language is governed by the syntactic mode. Givon interprets language acquisition, language change and language variation in terms of movement along this continuum.

Critique on Givon's theory

Linguistically, Newmeyer (2001) maintains, grammaticalization is often regarded in the literature as a distinct process requiring explanatory machinery unique to its own domain. However, he argues, on the contrary that "grammaticalization is simply a cover term for certain syntactic, semantic, and phonetic changes, all of which can apply independently of each other" (p. 187). With respect to Givon's opposition of pragmatic and syntactic modes of

communication (syntactization), mixed results obtained thus far in SLA research (Ellis, 1994: Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991) suggesting that it is too early to judge how well the distinction serves researchers as a point of departure of the functionalist analysis of language change.

For example, Sato's (1988) ten-month study of two child Vietnamese learners of English found little evidence of vertical constructions, and scaffolded utterances. In fact, both learners, contrary to the theory, encoded plenty of simple complete propositions from the start and were able to do so without the help of interlocutor scaffolding. Clearer evidence of the absence of syntactization, was seen in the learners' failure to produce complete relative clauses and gerundive complements. Sato suggests that interaction may be insufficient to ensure full syntactization, and that encounters with written language may be crucial. Underlying Givon's positions is the assumption that learners will be functionally motivated to develop their interlanguages. That is, the drive to communicate more effectively leads learners to syntacticize. However, Sato has cast doubts on whether communicative need by itself is sufficient to ensure high levels of interlanguage development.

Support of Givon's theory

Linguistically speaking, Van Valin (cited in Butler, 2008) argues "grammatical structure can only be understood and explained with reference to its semantic and communicative functions. Syntax is not autonomous" (p. 2). Birch (1982) further asserts, "linguistic competence does not create communicative competence" (p. 82). In SLA somewhat more convincing evidence of syntactization comes from Pfaff's (1992) study in which evidence is provided for

syntactization in the acquisition of L2 German by pre-school and early school-age Turkish children. She found, for instance, that main verb use of '*sein*' and '*haben*' preceded the auxiliary use of the same verbs.

Dittmar (cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004) also argued that the conversational talk of his elementary adult learners showed many characteristics of the pragmatic mode. In particular, he argued that their utterances were typified by a theme-rheme (or topic-comment) structure, rather than by a grammar-based subject- predicate structure. Typical examples from his German interlanguage data are:

Ich alleine - nicht gut : I alone - not good

Immer arbeite - nicht krank : Always work - not ill

Ich vier Jahre - Papa tot : I four years - father dead

Conclusion

In functionalist approach to SLA, it is argued that the great variety of interlanguage forms produced by second language learner cannot be interpreted unless attention is paid 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 (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Align with this, MacWhinney (2008) name three obvious differences between first and second language learners. First, children who are learning their mother tongue are also engaged in learning about how the world works. In contrast, second language learners already have a full understanding of the world and human society. Second, children are able to rely on a highly flexible brain that has not yet been committed to other tasks. In contrast, second language learners have to deal with a brain that has

already been committed in various ways to the task of processing the first language. Third, children can rely on social support from their caregivers. In contrast, second language learners are often heavily involved in social and business commitments in their first language that distract them from interactions in the new language.

Looking from another broad angle, generally, there are four sentence forms in language: declarative form (with the direct function of giving information), question form (with the direct function of getting information), imperative form (with the direct function of requesting), and exclamation form (with the direct function of expressing feelings). However, these four forms are used in a myriad of different functions. 'It is hot here' is a declarative sentence that may have a function of requesting (that is, would you open the window!) and not giving information. Therefore, the map between form and function is not always direct, and sometimes it is indirect. Austin (1999) in his speech act theory emphasizes on felicity conditions as important criteria to be met in speech functioning. Therefore, while acquiring second language, learners need to become pragmatically and culturally aware of both direct and indirect functions of different forms of the target language.

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