Functional Approaches to Language: Implications for Teaching
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Abstract

• There is an historically wide gap between English in the schools and linguistics, which attempts to develop an understanding of language on scientific ground, but has failed to give the discipline of English what it most desires, a direct connection between the study of grammar and effective reading and writing. This may have been exacerbated by late twentieth-century grammars, which posit that grammar is best understood as an autonomous formal system and—for the generative grammarians—posits that language is not only formal, but innate, hard-wired into the brain, independent even from normal cognitive processes. English teachers have been caught between a traditional school grammar, with its emphasis on surface correctness, and a linguistic grammar that seems inherently independent of discourse. The “grammar in context” movement in the schools has responded to the gap between language study and practical use by trying to diminish attention to grammar, inadvertently diminishing knowledge about language within the English profession. More recent grammars—corpus, functional, and cognitive—together with usage-based models for language acquisition hold as yet unrealized potential for healing the grammar/writing split.
Grammar is error in the public mind

• “The field of composition studies is still plagued by public perceptions that writing instruction is, or should be, primarily concerned with matters of style and structural conventions, that style is conflated with perceptions of what constitutes appropriate usage, and that proper usage is equated with grammar” (Cosgrove, 2010).
Sentence as autonomous

• “If the study of grammar and mechanics is brought to bear on the composing process at all, it is likely to influence only the most concrete levels, the planning and editing of specific sentences. But such study would have no effect on the higher-level processes of deciding on intentions and generating and organizing ideas. “ (Hillocks, 1986, 226).
Whole language emphasizes inevitability of acquisition

• “It seems reasonable to suppose that a child cannot help constructing a particular sort of transformational grammar to account for the data presented to him, any more than he can control his perception of solid objects or his attention to line and angle. Thus it may well be that the general features of language structure reflect, not so much the course of one’s experience, but rather the general character of one’s capacity to acquire knowledge—in the traditional sense, one’s innate ideas and innate principles” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 59).
Language happens. Naming it loses importance.

• “Among those most committed to models of “growth” in learning English, the teaching of any knowledge about language was considered to be subservient to the primary goal of facilitating personal growth in and through language; and since knowledge about language was generally understood as traditional school grammar, which many teachers had found not helpful to children’s learning, it was a relatively easy step to argue for its abandonment” (Christie, 2010, p.59).
Minimalists reduce instruction to error avoidance

• “Frankly, I suspect that a conscious knowledge of grammar, even just a bit of grammar, has little value beyond school except perhaps in speaking according to mainstream conceptions of “correctness” when desired and, of course, in editing effectively, though certainly some professions might require a little more knowledge of grammar than others” (Weaver, 2010, 203).
• The Counter Argument: Language as
  • emergent,
  • discourse sensitive,
  • semiotic
• We see three major hypotheses as guiding the cognitive approach to language:
• Language is not an autonomous cognitive faculty.
• Grammar is conceptualization
• Knowledge of language emerges from language use.
• (Croft & Cruse, 2004, 1.)
• “Portraying grammar as a purely formal system is not only wrong, but wrong-headed. I will argue, instead, that grammar is meaningful. This is so in two respects. For one thing, the elements of grammar—like vocabulary items—have meanings in their own right. Additionally, grammar allows us to construct and symbolize the more elaborate meanings of complex expressions (like phrases, clauses, and sentences). It is thus an essential aspect of the conceptual apparatus through which we apprehend and engage the world. And instead of being a distinct and self-contained cognitive system, grammar is not only an integral part of cognition but also a key to understanding it” (Langacker, 2008, 3-4)
“Functionality is **intrinsic** to language; that is to say, the entire architecture of language is arranged along functional lines. Language is as it is because of the functions in which it has evolved in the human species” (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, 31).
Implications for teaching

• “For the SFL theorist, to promote learning in English is to promote teaching and learning about the very resource with which students shape their ideas, information, experiences, and values. Neither traditional grammar, on the one hand, nor rather open exhortations to “personal growth” in English on the other, will adequately address the needs of the English student” (Christie, 2010, p. 61).
“Children must have some ability to conceptualize aspects of their perceptual experience in order to acquire linguistic conventions. But at the same time the process of acquiring linguistic conventions serves to focus children’s attention on aspects of their experience that they might not otherwise have focused on. The relationship between children’s language and cognition is a two-way street” (Tomasello, 2003, p.63).
“Grammar cannot be a fixed property of human brains, but is emergent, constantly undergoing revision as it is deployed and redesigned in everyday talk” (Ford, Fox, and Thompson, 2003, 119).
“Usage factors reveal language as a natural, organic social instrument, not an abstract logical one. The structures and meanings expressed grammatically in language are highly tied to our experiences and the uses to which we put linguistic forms” (Bybee, 2010, 193).
Functional nature of language in corpus studies

• “Factor interpretations depend on the assumption that linguistic co-occurrence patterns reflect underlying communicative functions. That is, particular sets of linguistic features co-occur in text because they reflect shared functions” (Biber, 1995, p.115).
“The implications for education are enormous.

- Minimalist positions are built on far less solid ground if grammar is not something innate and activated in early childhood, simply put to use as adults, but rather a far more detailed, concrete, contextual system that develops over a lifetime of interaction and use. In addition, study of grammar would not be study of a ‘formal’ system, but a conceptual system, deeply grounded in context. Language is not a neutral system, to be attended to only when it runs counter to prescriptive rules, but deeply tied to cognition and to discourse. The form of the text and the language of the text are its meaning, in a very fundamental way” (Hancock, 2010, 203).
We need to demystify literacy

• “Researchers and educators need a more complete understanding of the linguistic challenges of schooling. In the absence of an explicit focus on language, students from certain social class backgrounds continue to be privileged and others to be disadvantaged in learning, assessment, and promotion, perpetuating the obvious inequalities that exist today” (Schleppegrell 2004, 3).
A final analogy

• linguistics is to literacy
• as biology is to human health.
To say something differently is to say something different.

• “An expression implies a particular construal, reflecting just one of countless ways of perceiving and portraying the situation in question” (Langacher, 2008, 7).
Literacy is emergent

• Different kinds of texts and different genres emerge to accomplish complex goals in a highly technical world. The more we can understand the demands of literacy, the better we will be at helping students meet those challenges.
Final thought

• Meaning and form are in direct, dynamic relation. A systematic pedagogy based on that core principle has yet to come.


