Language Theories and Language Teaching—from Traditional Grammar to Functionalism

Yanhua Xia

School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China

Abstract—linguistic theories have greatly influenced language teaching theories in whatever stage they have been. By reviewing the three main stages of linguistic theories that have existed until now in the history of linguistics, this article has generalized the language teaching theories and the classroom characters resulted from them.

Index Terms—language theory, grammar translation method, audio-lingual method, communicative approach

It's universally acknowledged that any new language teaching theory cannot come into being without the break in linguistic theory first. And any generation of linguistic theory has brought about new language teaching theory as well. Until now, the theories of linguistics have mainly experienced three stages: traditional grammar, structuralism and functionalism. They are closely related to each other and generated the change of language teaching theories.

I. TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR

A. Definition of Traditional Grammar

What is traditional grammar? This can be a hard question to answer. One opinion about traditional grammar is that it includes two concepts. One is narrow; another is broad. "Narrowly speaking, traditional grammar refers to the grammar theories originated from ancient Greece and Rome, which became popular in the end of the 18th century before the birth of historical comparative grammar and dominated the research of grammar and language teaching for a long time in Europe. It values the old language model, emphasizes written language, neglect oral language. It tries to purify language and settle language. So it's called prescriptive grammar, which was adopted by most school in their language class. In this case, it's called school grammar as well. Broadly speaking, traditional grammar includes the scholarly traditional grammar that originated from the end the 19th century as well. Some of this kind of grammar emphasizes the principal of historical comparative study of language; some emphasizes contemporary language phenomena. Generally speaking, both of them take the attitude of descriptivism, trying to describe the change of language and the use of language objectively." (Yin, 1990, p. 1)

Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics has given a similar definition: Traditional grammar is "a grammar which is usually based on earlier grammars of Latin or Greek and applied to some other language, often inappropriately". And it has given an example to illustrate this: "Some grammarians stated that English had six CASES because Latin had six cases. These grammarians were often notional and prescriptive in their approach. Although there has been a trend towards using grammars which incorporate more modern approached to language description and language teaching, some schools still use traditional grammars".

B. Grammar Translation Method

The direct influence language teaching received from traditional grammar theory is grammar translation method of language teaching. A typical lesson conducted under the guidance of this method bears the following characters:

(1) The ultimate purpose of foreign language teaching is to read materials written by foreign language, such as reading foreign classics, so written language is emphasized rather than oral language. The goal of foreign language learning is to translate that foreign language into one's mother tongue. If a student can do this, he or she has become successful in foreign language study.

(2) Because oral language ability is not the goal of this kind of teaching, it results in many learners who have learnt even more than ten years buy still couldn't use it to communicate with native speakers of the language he or she had learnt.

(3) Teachers are the absolute authorities in the class. Students are just absorbers, busy with writing down every detail of the knowledge teachers give them. The class is always teacher-centered.

(4) Langue form, i.e. grammar, is emphasized. Students are always encouraged to grasp this part. In order to make students understand this part clearly, teachers always use their native languages to conduct the lessons. They usually use example sentences to illustrate the grammar rules they have just taught, students are required to follow the example to make sentences by using the grammar.

(5) The contents of texts are usually neglected. Instead the texts are often used as the material for teachers to explain those long and detailed grammatical problems.

(6) Students are required to start to read classics at an early stage.

(7) Students usually only do one kind of exercise. That is translation.

C.   Evaluation of Grammar Translation Method

Today, when we look back to reevaluate grammar translation method again, it gets the following judgments:

(1) It exaggerated the function in the learning of a foreign language.

(2) It emphasized too much on the knowledge of language, ignored the training the language skills.

(3) The whole process of foreign language teaching is mechanical, out of the touch of real language environment, no practical meaning.

(4) It pays attention only to written language instead of spoken language.

Anyhow, people shall never forget that grammar translation method have already done so much for foreign language teaching. Its contribution is still great.

II.   STRUCTURALISM

A.   Why Did Structuralism Come into Being?

Some scholars gradually became not satisfied with structuralism when they got to see clearly about the flaws of traditional grammar. They thought it blocked the way of further research of language. It eventually would cause negative effect on language development and the development of linguistics. They looked for new approaches to language study, and this brought about structuralism (structural linguistics).

B.   What Is Structuralism?

According to *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, Structuralism is "an approach to linguistics which stresses the importance of language as a system and which investigates the place that linguistic unit such as sounds, words, sentenced have within this system".

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, called as the father of modern traditional linguist, is widely respected as the founder of structuralism. He is a major modern linguist who made preparations for structuralism. Saussure affirmed the validity and necessity of diachronic approaches used by former linguists and then introduced the new synchronic approach, drawing linguists' attention to the nature and composition of language and its constituent parts. That is to say, Saussure holds that language is a highly organic unity with internal and systematic rules.

III.   DIFFERENCED BETWEEN TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR AND STRUCTURALISM

If we study the two approaches carefully, we find they have the following differences:

(1) Traditional grammar consider written language to be the first place, spoken language the second. But for structuralism, it's just the opposite.

(2) Traditional grammar is prescriptive. It holds that pure language must be in accordance with grammar, otherwise it corrupts language. Structuralism is descriptive. They think if we want to study language, we must describe language first. Whether a language is pure or not is just a matter of how we set the criteria.

(3) Traditional grammar classifies languages into different levels according to their closeness to Latin. Latin and the language of classics are considered to be the perfect languages, the rest are languages of less perfection. Structuralism denies this. It considers any language of any nation of minority is kind of well-developed communication system.

(4) The description of languages by traditional grammar was a total mess. It often describes languages of different time together. Structuralism holds that only languages of the same time can be studied, it prefers diachronic study of languages.

(5) Traditional grammar does study about the inner part of languages independently, it does not view the different parts of a language are closely related with each other. Structuralism gives systematic study to all the layers of a language as a general principle.

(6) The description of language by traditional grammar is always subjective because its research is often based on the meaning rather than language form. However, structuralism gives objective description of language materials. Any subjective involvement in the description of language is not allowed.

From the above comparison, we can see that their differences are rather huge. Their difference has made us realized that it was basing on the total destroy of traditional grammar that structuralism came into being. It's more scientific than traditional grammar. It more objectively describes languages on a whole. Because of all these, it was welcomed by scholar since the end of the 19th century, and soon became popular in the whole world.

IV.   TWO SCHOOLS OF STRUCTURALISM

Structuralism has two schools, European school and American school. They are not quite the same. Let's have a look at them respectively.

A. European School

Saussure is considered to be the representative of the European school. His contribution mainly includes two aspects. On the one hand, he settled down the general direction of modern linguistics, made clear the essence of language and designed the tasks of linguistic research. Saussure's view that the meanings of words are to be understood through their relations to each other was quite opposed to the positivist method among dominant academicians in his day, he sought to understand language through analysis of sounds and their impact on the nervous system. On the other hand, several distinctions Saussure made laid down great foundation for later research. They are langue and parole, synchronically and diachronically (i.e. historically). Without making their relationships clear, the research of modern linguistics is likely to get back on the way of traditional grammar.

B. American School

Leonard Bloomfield is widely respected as one of the best linguists of the last century and one of the best of all time as well. He spent most of his time dealing with comparing and contrasting Germanic languages. His best know publication *Language* dealing with a standard text gave a tremendous influence on his contemporaries and followers. Until very recently most American linguists considered themselves Bloomfield's disciples in some sense. Whether they studied or learned from him or not, many of their linguistic works have taken the form of working out questions raised by Bloomfield. And methods they adopted are just those suggested by him too.

Bloomfield invented immediate constitute analysis (IC analysis) to dissect a sentence into small parts. e. g. for this sentence, handsome Jackie Chang is a famous actor. We can treat it in the following way by using IC analysis:

The first analysis: Handsome Jackie Chang∕is a famous boxer.

The second analysis: Handsome ∕∕ Jackie Chang∕is a ∕∕ famous boxer.

The third analysis: Handsome ∕∕ Jackie Chang∕is∕∕∕ a ∕∕ famous∕∕∕ boxer.

If a sentence is longer, this process can continually go on. No matter how long a sentence is, by adopting IC analysis, it can be divided into the different smallest constitutes which make the sentence. In this way, the different constitutes of a sentence can be examined. And it proves that a language is a system of symbolic structures.

We have to consider a little bit about the research of the psychological fields at the beginning of the 20th century too. At that time, mentalism lead by W. Wundt was in a dilemma. Psychologists were thinking about a new theory to help psychology get out of the mud. Then, a psychological revolution launched by J. B. Watson established behaviorism to replace Wundt's mentalism. They argued that the acquirement of any knowledge involves direct experience: knowledge acquired only through objective and observable experiment can be reliable, otherwise not. Any feeling, impression is not to be dependent upon.

Bloomfield used behaviorism to guide his structuralist approach to language study, and audio-lingual language teaching method was brought forward.

V. AUDIO-LINGUAL LANGUAGE TEACHING METHOD

Different from grammar translation method discussed above, audio-lingual language teaching method treats language as a kind of human habit, it is the speech that is supposed to be spoken by language speakers rather than written out by them. So we need to teach language itself, not knowledge.

Usually, a language class conducted by way of Audio-lingual language teaching method has the following characters:

Drilling is a central technique. The study process of a foreign language is the process of habit forming. The first step is mimicking, and this process repeats constantly until a learner feels natural to speak out the sentence he or she is required to learn. That means the formation of a habit of saying such a sentence naturally. Teachers are required to guide students to practice the same sentence again and again until they finally get familiar with it. As for the dialogues and texts in the textbooks, students are required to read them again and again, until they could recite them. Communicative activities are achieved through a long, boring and repetitive process of rigorous drills and exercises.

One main teaching responsibility of the teacher is that he or she should try his or her best to prohibit students making mistakes. The existence of mistakes may stay in the habit, which is called mistake acquisition. So whenever a mistake is found out, the teacher should correct it at once.

Teachers play the role of a model for the target language; students should try their best to mimic the pronunciation and intonation of the teacher. Teachers are supposed to provide very standard, native-sound pronunciation and intonation of the target language. The primary goal of teaching is to secure formal correctness. Their native language habits are not supposed to be taken into the classroom, translation is forbidden at early stages.

Language materials are not shown to the students with nothing else. They are always shown in certain contexts. The teaching of grammar is conducted within dialogues. Grammatical explanation is often avoided. Varieties of language usage are recognized, but teachers don't emphasize this.

This method considers that every language has a certain amount of sentence patterns that help students form the habit of using it. The purpose of language teaching is to let students acquire these sentence patterns. They learn sentence structures before vocabulary. The introduction of new vocabulary is conducted through dialogues.

Teachers usually ask another question just after students have answered the former question. This is to help them form the mechanism of answering questions automatically.

Oral language is considered to be more important than written language, so oral practice is more emphasized in the whole course of teaching and learning. The natural order of foreign language study is listening goes before speaking. Speaking goes before reading, reading goes before writing.

The teaching of culture is separated from the teaching of language. Audio-lingual language teaching method prefers to regard language as a kind of habit. It also values the importance of culture and regards it as an inseparable part in the life of the native speakers of the target language. However, it does not involve cultural teaching into the teaching of the target language; teachers only introduce the cultural knowledge to the whole class.

To sum up, the final purpose of audio-lingual language teaching method is to train the students in the target language and let them have the ability to use it to communicate with the native speakers. A teacher acts as the conductor of an orchestra. Students follow the tapes or the model of the teacher to practice. The native language of the learners and the target language are of compared by the teacher, and this kind of comparison is to find the differences between the two languages. This is to reduce the disturbance that might come from their native language.

VI. DEVELOPMENT OF LINGUISTIC THEORIES IN THE LATER HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

A. *Chomsky and Transformational-generative Grammar*

Noam Chomsky has made distinguished achievements in many fields including linguistics, philosophy, intellectual history and international politics, etc. He is a fellow in several societies including linguistics, politics, psychology, arts and sciences in the United States and abroad. He has awarded honorary degrees from tens of universities from Cambridge University to Harvard University. However, he is best known for his contribution in linguistics.

"During the years 1951 to 1955, Chomsky was a Junior Fellow of the Harvard University Society of Fellows. While a Junior Fellow he completed his doctoral dissertation entitled, Transformational Analysis. The major theoretical viewpoints of the dissertation appeared in the monograph Syntactic Structure, which was published in 1957. This formed part of a more extensive work, The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory, circulated in mimeograph in 1955 and published in 1975". The reason why Chomsky invented new theory for structuralism is that he found there are many limitations in the classification of language structure according to distribution and arrangement. So he started to punch the prevailing structuralist descriptive linguistics. Due to this academic practice, Chomsky established the world-famous Transformational-generative (TG) grammar step by step. In 1957, he published his syntactic structures, which marked the beginning of the Chomskyan Revolution.

By observing that some important facts had never been analyzed adequately, Chomsky gave an innateness hypothesis. First, children acquire language competence very fast and with almost no effort. It has been universally acknowledged that children become fluent speakers of their native language by the age of five. If we consider the fact that children shall never be intellectually prepared for any other subjects of science, this is quite a shocking fact. A child never seems to make conscious, intentional, painstaking efforts in acquiring his native language as in learning any other subject, such as mathematics or physics. What's more, one amazing phenomenon is that the first language acquisition unconditionally takes place without any intentional or explicit teaching of it. And the language a child hears is often not necessarily the most standard of the language he or she is acquiring. What is that which enables a child retain those correct expressions and avoid what is not proper in the language? In terms of the stages of language acquisition, all children usually follow the same stages: the babbling stage, nonsense word stage, holophrastic stage, two-word utterance, developing grammar, near-adult grammar, and full competence. In terms of the correctness of grammar, a child can not only produce and understand sentences he has heard, but also sentences he has never come across before. The questions are the ones that the former linguists never thought about seriously. Through discussing these questions, Chomsky insists that if children are not born with a predisposition to acquire a language in almost the same way as they are born with the innate ability to walk, these phenomena shall never be possible.

Basing on the hypothesis, Chomsky believes that language competence is somewhat innate, and that our children are born with a language acquisition device (LAD), or language competence, which fit children for language learning. LAD is supposed to consist of three elements: a hypothesis-maker, linguistic universal, and an evaluation procedure. Chomsky further put out a new theory, "generative grammar". By this, he simply means "a system of rules that in some explicit and well-defined way assigns structural descriptions to sentences"(Hu, 2002, p. 724). That is Chomsky believes that every child of a language is proficient in and internalized a kind of generative grammar that proves his knowledge of his first language. And the theory of generative grammar experience altogether five periods from the beginning until the later theories, which has really brought life to structuralism in the later half of last century, helped it to go on. But the theory itself has been very much controversial. Some scholars completely accept it. Some agree that it is a kind of breakthrough of structuralism but do not agree with all of it. Some totally reject it. Among them, there are even his students.

B. *Hymes's Communicative Competence – Shift from Structuralism to Functionalism*

Dell Hymes, Commonwealth Professor of Anthropology, Emeritus professor of University of Virginia, teaching classes in linguistic anthropology, Native American mythology, ethno poetics, and Native American poetry. He is one of the persons who do not completely agree with Chomsky. Hymes uses his knowledge of anthropology, linguistics, and ethnography in working with verbal traditions and languages of Oregon and Washington. In 1972, Hymes pointed out

that Chomsky's theory about language competence is not convincing enough to interpret language phenomenon. He put forward the theory of communicative competence. In it, he argues that "language competence is part of communicative competence which includes four parts:

(1) Probability, i.e., whether or not communicative competence can be in accordance with grammar rules, whether or not communicative competence can be realized in the level of language form.

(2) Practicability, i.e., whether or not a language can be used for communication and to what degree it can be involved in communication.

(3) Accuracy, i.e., whether or not a speech is appropriate in a certain context and to what degree it is appropriate.

(4) Effectiveness, i.e., whether or not a speech has been made and to what degree it has been made" (Wen, 1999, p. 4).

C. Canale & Swain's Enrichment to Communicative Competence

During the 1980s, Canale & Swain contributed more to enrich Hymes communicative competence. They thought that communicative competence at least includes four aspects of knowledge and skills:

(1) Linguistic competence, i.e., the innate grammar of a speaker which helps to generate correct sentence, as same as what Chomsky refers to.

(2) Sociolinguistic competence, i.e., the ability of a speaker to understand the speech of others and make a speech appropriately due to a certain kind of time, place and partner he or she is talking with.

(3) Discourse competence, i.e., the ability of a speaker to generate meaning out of disordered language data. It includes two aspects named cohesion and coherence.

(4) Strategic competence, i.e., the ability of a speaker to use different kinds of communication strategies according to different discourse, such as avoidance, interpretation, transcription, asking for help, pretending to be having not heard, euphemism, correction, repetition, hesitation, guess, etc., for the purpose of achieving successful communication.

D. Latest Contribution by Bachman and WEN Qiu-fang

This is not the end of the disputes about what are included in communicative competence, While Canale and Swain's strategic competence puts its emphasis on "compensatory" strategies – that is, strategies used to compensate a shortage in some language area, the term has taken on a broader meaning in recent years. In 1990, Lyre F. Bachman, once being the president of the International Language Testing Association and the American Association for Applied Linguistics, provided a wider theoretical context of strategic competence through dividing it into three components. Later, in 1996, Bachman and Palmer improved the Bachman categories for strategic competence of 1990 to cover four components:

(1) Assessment, i.e., a speaker assesses which communicative goals are possibly to be achieved and what linguistic sources are needed.

(2) Goal-setting, i.e., a speaker identifies the specific tasks to be performed.

(3) Planning, i.e., a speaker retrieves the relevant items from his realm of language knowledge and plans their use.

(4) Execution, i.e., a speaker implements the plan.

We might think this is already broad and scientific enough. However, Chinese scholar WEN Qiu-fang added cross-cultural competence into it as well. Hence, this latest framework for strategic competence is much broader and more scientific than before.

VII. FUNCTIONAL-NOTIONAL APPROACH

These new theories finally brought the ideal of functional-notional grammar and functional-notional approach in language teaching. This new approach holds that the functions of language used in the real daily life are most important and it is essential for a language learner to take part in the everyday language activities such as giving directions, buying a ticket, bargaining or consoling and so on. That is to say, to know the forms of a language are important, but it is more important to know the functions and decide which situations to use each kind of function, the learner should practice real and practical communication in a language learning class. The teaching syllabus should describe the situations that a language learner might find himself or herself in, the language activities he is most likely to be involved into, the functions of language that are most frequently used, and the topics that are and common in life.

VIII. BIRTH OF FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS

M. A. K. Halliday, Emeritus Professor at the University of Sydney, is "world-renowned as the leading representative of systemic-functional linguistics and as an authority in many other areas of linguistics, including language in education, text linguistics, developmental linguistics, grammar, and social linguistics". In his theory, Halliday has intended to create a new approach in linguistics that regards language as foundational for the building of human experience. His insights and contributions form a new linguistic approach known as systemic-functional linguistics. Halliday stresses that language cannot be disassociated and disconnected from meaning. Systemic-functional linguistics considers communicative function and semantics as the basis of human language and communicative activity. Unlike structural approaches that favor syntax first, SFL-oriented linguists privilege an analysis within social context to find out how language reflects, and is controlled and influenced by, this social context. A key concept in Halliday's linguistics is the

"context of situation" which obtains "through a systematic relationship between the social environment on the one hand, and the functional organization of language on the other" (Halliday, 1985, p. 11).

IX.   COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH OF LANGUAGE TEACHING

With such great enrichment of language theories during this period of time, people couldn't help seeing the coming of new language teaching theory. And surely it did. These new theories have made it clear that communication is the most basic function and characteristic of language. Meanwhile, they have brought the birth of communicative approach of language teaching. This approach was first mentioned by Wilkins and Widdowson.

A.   Definition of Communicative Approach of Language Teaching

The communicative approach is characterized by a set of ideas that include not only a reconsideration of which aspects of language to teach, but also an emphasis on how to teach. The ancient Chinese proverb "giving a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teaching him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" can best illustrate this approach.

B.   Principles of Communicative Approach of Language Teaching

In communicative approach of language teaching, what matters most is that students should be aroused the desire to communicate something, supply them a purpose of communicating, for example, to write a letter to a friend, to make an appointment with a teacher, to book an airline ticket. Students should concentrate on the content of what they are saying or writing rather than on a particular grammatical point. They should use a variety of language structures rather than just a single language structure. During the course of a students' activity, the teacher shall not interrupt before it is finished; and the materials the teacher use will not dictate what specific language forms the students should use. That is to say, such activities should attempt to take the place of real communication in life. The multiple roles a teacher plays include planner, participant, diagnostician, provider, manager, and organizer etc.

The teaching syllabus of communicative language teaching will generally include:
(1) The social situations typically for students to use a foreign language.
(2) The topics they are likely to address.
(3) The language functions they need to use.
(4) The vocabulary and grammar structures needed for these functions.
(5) The communicative skills required in typical social situations.

C.   Problems Existing in Communicative Approach of Language Teaching

Communicative approach of language teaching has become the most scientific of all the language teaching theories we have so far, though, it still isn't a perfect approach. The problems lying in this approach are:
(1) Until now there is no agreed classification about the functions of language. This makes it not clear that how a teaching syllabus chooses what language functions to teach and arrange them as well.
(2) In what way a textbook arrange these functions and grammar is hard to be decided.
(3) In the actual practice of communicative approach language teaching, we find it's challenging to emphasize both language ability and communication competence.
(4) Our teachers are expected to improve their language ability and communicative competence too.

X.   CONCLUSION

All these issues can be real challenges to language teaching. To solve these problems, new language theories are expected to emerge in the new age. History has proved that new language-teaching theories are the off springs of new language theories. How much we understand our languages, how far we can go in teaching them. Only depending on new language theory, language teaching theory can move forward step by step. Luckily, the buds of spring are indeed round the corner. With several new branches of linguistics, such as computational linguistics, corpus linguistics, psycholinguistics, etc., are marching forward in a fast speed in our time with the assistance of information technology, brain science, psychological science, and so on, we hopefully will witness the day that new language teaching theories will emerge in the near future.

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Yanhua Xia was born in Luzhou, China in 1978. He received his M.A. degree in foreign linguistics and applied linguistics from University of Electronic Science and Technology, China in 2009.

He is currently an associate professor of English at School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China and a PhD candidate of English literature at School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing. Main areas of expertise include English teaching methodology, applied linguistics and British literature. Representative publication is "Reading Michael Longley for the Dialectic between Intertextuality and Literary Innovation" in *Contemporary Foreign Literature* (ISSN: 1001-1757), Vol. 19, No. 1, 2009.