

On Situating the Plausibility of Functionalism in SLA: A Discursive Look

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Abstract—Functionalists argue that society has to be considered as a system of interconnected parts. The basic idea of this approach to functionalism is that grammars are driven to become more efficient semiotic systems. Put another way, to functionalists, language is a specific faculty that imposes the output (grammar). The paper concentrates on the functional aspects of language learning and expatiates on the main tenets of functionalism from a discursive look.

Index Terms—functionalism, generativism, genre, interdiscursivity, intertextuality

I. INTRODUCTION

The approaches contributing to an external focus on second language acquisition (hereafter SLA) are classified within functionalism, which dates back to the early twentieth century and has its roots in the Prague School of Eastern Europe (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). As to Mehrgan (2012), the Prague linguistic conception has two designations. First of all, it is structural. Put differently, what this school of linguistics introduces is "the problem of structure, the problem of how language is shaped, and how its parts are related to each other" (Mehrgan, 2012, p. 37). Second, the Prague linguistics is also functional. The Prague functional linguistics inspired by de Saussure (1916, cited in Maftoon & Shakouri, 2012) pinpoints that "grammar is not autonomous" (p. 17). In other words, "language is a system of which all parts can and must be considered as synchronically interdependent" (Maftoon & Shakouri, 2012, p. 17). In functionalist approaches to SLA, it is argued that the great variety of interlanguage forms produced by second language learners cannot be interpreted unless attention is paid to the speech acts and to the ways they exploit the social, physical, and discourse context to help them make meaning (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Functionalists, in contrast with generativists, almost exclusively focus on performance and actually have very little to say about competence—the underlying linguistic system. To functionalists, the idea of competence is not necessarily at issue. In effect, it is the context which plays a pivotal role. Meanwhile, to functionalists, the communicative situation motivates, constrains, or otherwise determines grammatical structure (Nichols, 1984). Along the same line, functionalism can be defined as the belief that "the forms of natural languages are created, governed, constrained, acquired and used in the service of communicative functions" (Bates & MacWhinney, 1982). To a functionalist, the grammar of a language is described in the form of system networks, not as an inventory of structures. Although structure is a pivotal part of the description, it is interpreted as the outward form of language rather than as the defining characteristic of language. The paper, henceforth, is an attempt to have a discursive look at the plausibility of functionalism in SLA.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Recently, the importance of making appropriate linguistic choices in the path of SLA stirred debate within SLA circles. According to Verschueren (1999, cited in Wu, 2011), using language involves making linguistic choices either consciously or unconsciously, either for language external or internal reasons. These choices are made not only by language producers but also by interpreters (WU, 2011). Second language learners make these choices on the basis of highly flexible principle which, in contrast with rules, can be violated. In the paper, we are not going to explore how choices are made, but to pave the way in order to judge the plausibility of functional approaches to language acquisition if practitioners are supposed to study the faculty of language in an outward context. Overall, there are three functional approaches that have tremendous influence on SLA: (1) systemic linguistics, (2) functional typology, and (3) function-to-form mapping.

A. Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics (henceforth SFL) put forward by Halliday (1994) pays attention to how the speakers generate utterances and texts to convey their intended meanings. Put another way, SFL views language as a social semiotic, a resource people use to accomplish their purposes by expressing meanings in context. "The value of a theory" as to Halliday (1985), "lies in the use that can be made of it, and as Chapelle (1998) puts forth, to Halliday, a theory of language is essentially consumer oriented. Along the same line, Mitchell and Myles (2004) maintain systemic linguistics analyses language in terms of the interrelated systems of choices that are available for expressing meaning. The term systemic refers to the view of language as a network of systems. It connotes that the linchpin of language in linguistic description is a system rather than a structure, and language, per se, is the systematic resource for expressing meaning in context. In fact, functional linguistics, according to Halliday (1985), is the study of how people exchange meanings through the use of language.

Put simply, SFL holds that the use of language determines the form. In other words, function almost always determines the form. In the support of the idea, we could refer to Verschueren's (1987) linguistic adaptation theory. According to Verschueren, using language involves making linguistic choices, either consciously or unconsciously for language-internal or language-external reasons. In fact, language users are obliged to make on-the-spot choices once they enter the dynamic process of establishing effective communication. The quality of the choices they make is not the result of a mere *linguistic variability* or *negotiability*, but in turn utilizing the two mentioned along with the most crucial factor as *linguistic adaptability*. Such adaptation must exist in order to approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs just because both language producers, and at the same time, language interpreters affect the quality of the choices being made. According to Verschueren, language is adaptable. Adaptation operates not only at all levels of linguistic structuring, but also in all forms of language use. In sum, the process of adaptation is interdiscursive. Accordingly, the functioning of interdiscursivity as the process of adaptation to three variables of the *physical*, *social*, and *mental world* is not that much of an easy practice. Of course, the first two adaptation variables as *physical* and *social* can be viewed as passive, since either complexities of the physical reality or conventions and expectations of the social world are known as the language users' external factors. The third phase of adaptation which is to the mental world could be best referred to as the *active* functioning of interdiscursivity; this is mainly because it is rooted in the unveiled psychological and internal layers of the communicators' inner feelings, motives and emotions.

In this regard, when it is claimed that in SFL, the use of language determines the form, it is the form at the service of meaning. Meanwhile, the meaning is expressed through three metafunctions: ideational, textual, and contextual. That is, language is metafunctionally organized. All the three metafunctions are reflected in a huge system network, which specifies all the meaning potentials (Lin & Peng, 2006). A network is made up by a number of the so-called systems, each consisting of a set of semantic features (Lin & Peng, 2006). The usefulness of the system networks lies primarily in their ability to provide functional rather than structural descriptions (Mattheiessen & Bateman, 1991). Lin and Peng (2006), along the same line, hold "to generate an utterance, the system network is traversed, certain semantic features are selected, and the relevant realization rules are fired" (p. 331). Lin and Peng go on to hold that based on SFG, children gradually acquire a full system, and by using it they can produce a large number of sentences.

Essentially what language learners acquire, in Halliday's view, is not a system of rules which govern language structure, but rather meaning potential: "What the speaker/hearer can, not what he knows" (Mitchel & Myles, 2004, p. 54). To Halliday, the process of acquisition consists of "mastering certain basic functions of language and developing a meaning potential for each" (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 54). Thus, language acquisition is learning how to express meanings. As Chapelle (1998) claims this perspective subordinates the acquisition of linguistic structure, recognizing the learners can express meanings using a variety of analyzed and unanalyzed pieces of the lexicogrammar.

B. Functional Typology

Functional typology is based on the comparative study of a wide range of the world's languages. It is an orientation to linguistics, sometimes called Greenbergian approach attributed to Greenberg (1966)—the founder of modern typology (Campbell, 2001). This approach is called *functional* because analysis integrates considerations of language structure, meaning, and use (Mitchel & Myles, 2004), and *typological* because it attempts to explain the patterns through appeal to language function in cross-linguistic comparison (Campbell, 2001). In order to take a good grasp of the function of a language, there should exist the notion of genre analysis in a more comprehensive fashion. Traditional genre (analysis) has focused on genres as texts—analyzing their prototypical structural or textual features. More recent genre analysis has also focused on genres as rhetoric—as social actions designed to perform certain speech acts or engage audiences in social contexts (Dean, 2008, cited in Beach, 2011). The recent definition of genre analysis is more in line with the objectives of the functionalist view. In fact, genre analysis is best considered a literacy tool exclusively designed to empower students identify and analyze the fixed patterns in both text and social genres. Utilizing such tool would help students digest not only the prototypical structural features of various texts and social events, but at the same time how genres are applied rhetorically in its real sense, in order to engage others and how they get adapted to employ various genres or create them effectively.

Along the same line, Campbell (2001) asserts languages can be typologized according to almost any linguistic trait, and indeed classifications based on widely varied attributes have been proposed in the history of linguistics. Typological study has contributed to the understanding of many concepts of grammar and of how they interact with one another, how they function, and how they are distributed in the world's languages. Typological research also

incorporates many assumptions about how languages can change (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). There is an attempt to account for developmental stages of L2 acquisition, for why some L2 constructions are more or less difficult than others for learners to acquire. A particularly important concept which is tied to these accounts is markedness (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Greenberg (1966) assigning the designations “marked” and “unmarked” to opposing structural entities asserts that there is a consistently asymmetric relationship in term of distribution and/or syntagmatic structure and/or paradigmatic complexity. Meanwhile, Mitchell and Myles (2004) assert:

the notion of markedness deals with whether any specific feature of a language is “marked” or “unmarked.” A feature is “unmarked” if it occurs more frequently than a contrasting element in the same category, if it is less complex structurally or conceptually, or if it is more “normal” or “expected” along some other dimension. The concept applies to all levels of linguistic analysis. (p. 57).

An important point to help understand the concept of markedness as “a polysemous term in linguistics” (Haspelmath, 2005, p. 3) is that “markedness relations are not fixed, but rather depend on the language-internal evaluation of the terms of an opposition” (Battistella 1990, cited in Jin, 2008, p. 298). In a rough comparison, once comparing two related forms as one marked and the other unmarked in one language, what was considered as marked form might be known as unmarked in another language. For instance, the nominative case is unmarked form in Russia, while it is regarded as marked form in English.

C. Function-to-form Mapping

A basic concept from function-to-form look is that acquisition of both L1 and L2 involves a process of grammaticalization. Basic to work on grammaticalization is the concept of *cline*. Cline has both historical and synchronic implications:

From a historical perspective, a cline is conceptualized as a natural “pathway” along which forms evolve; a schema which models the development of forms. Synchronically, a cline can be thought of as a “continuum”: an arrangement of forms along an imaginary line at one end which is a fuller form of some kind, perhaps “lexical,” and at the opposite a compacted and reduced form, perhaps “grammatical”. (Hopper & Traugott, 2003, p. 6)

The term cline is a metaphor for the empirical observation. From the point of view of change, “forms do not shift abruptly from one category to another, but go through a series of small transitions, transitions that tend to be similar in type across languages” (Hopper & Traugott, 2003, p. 6). On a word, as to Hopper and Traugott, a cline is both diachronic and synchronic, putting an emphasis on the fact that grammaticalization is a panchronic phenomenon. In other words, “many grammatical forms are hybrids between old and new forms, reflecting both synchronic and diachronic processes” (Ariel, 2008, p. 254).

Michel and Myles (2004) elucidates such shift in this way that a grammatical function (e.g., the expression of past time) is first conveyed by shared extralinguistic knowledge and inferencing based on the context of discourse, then by a lexical word (such as *yesterday*), and only later by a grammatical marker (such as the suffix *-ed*). For example, if you ask a beginning learner of English what he did the day before he might say *I play soccer*, relying on context to convey the meaning of past time; a somewhat more advanced learner might say *Yesterday I play soccer*, using an adverb to convey the meaning of past; and a still more advanced learner might say *I played soccer*, using the grammatical inflection *-ed* (Mitchel & Myles, 2004).

D. Functionalism Rooted in Interdiscursivity

In order to better digest the deep meaning of functionalism, one should have a shallow understanding of the notion of interdiscursivity. The term interdiscursivity is a fuzzy notion which might be mistaken by the term intertextuality as the border line is so tricky. Bhatia (2008) provides a through distinction between the two notions of intertextuality and interdiscursivity. Intertextuality deals with the interrelationships within and across texts focusing primarily on text-internal properties, while interactions within and across genres involving text-external resources are termed interdiscursivity. In fact, interdiscursivity refers to the mixing of diverse genres discourses or styles associated with institutional and social meanings in a single text (Wu, 2011).

Generally speaking, intertextuality is the phenomenon that other surrounding texts are overtly drawn upon within a single text. This task is performed usually via explicit surface features namely as quotations and citations. In such sense, almost all texts are considered intertextual, for they utilize the elements of the other texts. From functionalist perspective, these two notions of intertextuality and interdiscursivity have great in common. In the same line, interdiscursivity operates on a totally different fashion as it refers to how a text is constituted by an amalgamation of other language conventions (genres, discourses and styles). Some scholars have preferred to use the term ‘*generic intertextuality*’ instead of interdiscursivity; nevertheless, these two terminologies do not necessarily have the same connotations. This is highlighted in the sense that the term indiscursivity does not always refer to the combination of different genres.

The notion of interdiscursivity discussed above, is mainly grounded on Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986) notions of heteroglossia and dialogicality. Heteroglossia holds that any text is a mixture of the speaker’s own voice and the voices of other people. In better words, the voices of other people act as the hidden beacon lights which guide the stream flow of the speaker’s voice. This concept is exactly what functionalism has always pointed at. Bakhtin’s definition of heteroglossia was very primary. Later on, heteroglossia was recontextualized and modified by Fairclough (1992) as

interdiscursivity. However the latter, dialogicality, connotes that all texts and utterances are dialogic in nature and might be understood and digested against the background of other texts. What is unique to any produced texts or utterances is the thought consolidated in the mind of the writer or speaker. Otherwise, the produced texts or utterances are considered as the implicit/explicit elements of other sources being reformulated in one's style. Once the elements of other language conventions are left untouched or in some cases, the elements of other genres, discourses and styles are skillfully manipulated in a new fashion; then the notion of interdiscursivity could be spotlighted. Thus, in real-life application, when being looked upon away from functionalist perspectives, these two notions should be distinguished. In simple, dialogicality is the especial property of human beings since human beings are semiotic animal, whereas interdiscursivity is the property of text and utterances, the notion which takes dialogicality into consideration systematically. So, dialogicality covers a broader scope and is embraces the general principle of language use, discourse and cognition; hence, interdiscursivity is considered as a relatively exclusive linguistic phenomenon. Furthermore, these two notions are the two sides of a single continuum but with different mode of application. Dialogicality is most applicable and familiar in the analysis of the literature, arts and scholarly texts, in which we could discuss not only the dialogical relations within a given text or piece of art or music, but also the dialogue between generations of texts and authors (artists, composers, etc.). On the contrary, interdiscursivity is generally applicable to both literary and nonliterary texts, and focuses on the dialogical relations between various language conventions in close relation to certain social preferences or ideological importance. Since, in reality, there exist the combination of literary and nonliterary texts and utterances, the notion of interdiscursivity has a lot in common with functionalist points of view, as the language use determines language form.

E. Functionalism and Constitutive Intertextuality

The emphasis in functionalism is over the notion of language use which plays a pivotal role over the language forms, i.e., the language use determines the language form. If one takes a deep look over the concept of intertextuality, it is somehow the inner layers of the texts which carry the potentiality of the stratifications of the notion of interdiscursivity. The term interdiscursivity coined by Fairclough (1992) is respected as an account for the overreaching concept of intertextuality. As definition goes, 'intertextuality' is defined as the property of texts that utilize full of other texts. Fairclough, further, defines two types of intertextuality: "manifest" intertextuality and "constitutive" intertextuality. Once the elements of one text or utterance exist explicitly in another text or utterance, and such task is implemented skillfully through techniques of discourse representation, presupposition, negation, metadiscourse, and/or irony, the outcome would be best regarded as the manifest intertextuality. *Constitutive intertextuality*, on the contrary, refers to the mixing configuration of discourse conventions such as genres, activity types, and styles in association with various kinds of discourse. Later, Fairclough introduces the new terminology as interdiscursivity to substitute constitutive intertextuality.

There exists a common belief among several scholars (e.g., Kristeva, 1985) that from intertextuality point of view, there is a mutual relation between history and a text. The insertion of text into history (society) and at the same time, the insertion of history into texts (utterances) is an ongoing cumulative process, identical in nature. Functionalism puts a huge emphasis on the notion of language use rather than language forms, and indicates that the language use determines the language forms in which the language use are manifested. What we are deriving here at is that the cumulative process of intertextuality has two impact namely as the *instant* impact and the *delayed* impact. The instant impact deals with surviving the situation through the appropriate language use, whereas the delayed one deal with the permanent changes establishes via the repetition of an utterance in different situations as the result of language use.

F. Functionalism and Critical Genre Analysis

Once the notion of critical genre analysis evolves, one of the most prominent features is the classification performed by Bonini(2010). In his works which were mainly inspired in Fairclough (2003) and Bhatia (2008), Bonini broadens the study scope of genre and discourse by offering a creative conceptual model Bonini (2010) comes up with a three-layer dimension as a) *social structure* –as an abstract entity (like the church, economics, social classes, etc.) comprising a set of possibilities of social practices and genres, and giving rise to one/more discourses; b) *discourse* – the representation of views of the world, identities and relationships which reproduces and at the same time constitutes the social structure, the social practice and thus their genres; and c) *genre* – a set of typical actions of textualization, text production and comprehension, which performs at least one social practice within various possible relational chains, carrying out then the discourse and the social structure. Even in the three classifications done by Bonini (2010), the language use is seen as the backbone of the classification, and that is exactly the aim and focus of functionalists.

What is prevalent in the Bonini's (2010) work is the notion that out of the mutual relation of social practices and genres, there may outburst a plethora of relationships, namely as that of *hypergeneric* (genres in relation to other genres, composing a higher genre or a rich genre), *mediatic* (genres in relation to the mediation unit that makes them circulate in society), *systemic* (genres in relation to other genres, creating a specific social routine), and *community* (genres in relation to other genres, according to the distribution of roles within the discourse community). Among the above classification, the notion of rich genre is an eye-catching one that is of high importance. The richness of genre is a gradual process which is known as the main product of language use. From functionalism perspective, it is so vivid that through the manifestation of language use in accordance with a particular situation, the richness of language form and

functions take place. In the same line, as language is the manifestation of culture, the issue of cultural maturity and richness is embedded in the proper genre development through the passage of time, the issue which is beyond the scope of this paper.

III. CONCLUSION

In order for effective communication to take place and at the same time, satisfying the communicative needs of the real life situations, the language users should move beyond their souls and decide critically on each and every word they utter. They must observe both themselves as the producers, and the interpreters of the scenery. It should be highlighted here that every bits of internal and external clues counts. As Hymes (1971, cited in Maftoon & Shakouri, 2012) asserts that language is not just a private affair; in fact, it is socially constructed. Socially constructed in the sense that every moment of the real-life settings of the acts and utterances, is the manifestation of the amalgamation of various on-the-spot decisions being made which are at the service of effective communications. Once the equilibrium is distorted, there would happen a conflict of ideas in either sides of the effective communication.

In a nutshell, effective communication is the starting point, but what makes an effective communication a stable one, and in the same line results in the richness of a particular genre is the exact notion of language use. The richness of a particular genre is a loop mainly stirred by the language use. From functionalist perspective, what makes a particular genre acceptable and reliable is the supremacy of language use over language form.

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