

From Dual-nature View of Language to Audiolingualism: A Reappraisal of Memory Aspect of Language

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Abstract—The purpose of the paper is to re-evaluate the memory aspect of language from the perspective of dual-nature view of language and Audiolingualism, a teaching approach once popular in the western world. I will begin by reviewing the conceptual evidence of dual-nature view of language that has accumulated in this area. After that, I expound the relationship between mimicry-memorisation and Audiolingualism through examining *Audiolingualism* from a historical perspective and discussing how memorisation is reflected in Audiolingualism. Finally, I conclude that more research are called to investigate as to how the memory aspect of language can be reflected and pragmatically applied in language teaching program.

Index Terms—dual-nature view of language, audiolingualism, mimicry-memorisation

I. INTRODUCTION

A typical linguistic model usually attaches primary importance to rules in the assumption that language is produced by ‘filling out’ these rules with lexical exponents. In this analytic approach to language description, the priority is to construct sentences which conform to the grammar (rule system) of the language in question (Skehan, 1998, p.371). Language is thus viewed as highly systematic and rule-governed behaviour which is responsible for the generation and comprehension of novel sentences. Emphasis on creativity and on novel construction of sentences are said to be heavily influenced by Chomsky and his rejection of behaviourist accounts of language use (see, e.g., Chomsky, 1957, 1965) (see, e.g., Chomsky, 1957, 1965). This paper, however, provides a conceptual framework for interpreting various manifestations of the importance of memory aspect of language from both dual-nature view of language and Audiolingualism, a teaching approach once popular in the western world.

II. DUAL-NATURE VIEW OF LANGUAGE

A. Critique the Rule-based Approach

Powerful potential for generation and flexibility as it may have, the rule-based approach is not without its drawbacks as far as actual use is concerned. The major vulnerability exists in the considerable degree of on-line computation (i.e. operating the rule system) it requires during language production. The computation, according to Skehan (1998), involves at least the following: 1) structures have to be constructed for the meanings which are to be expressed; 2) planning has to take place some distance in advance; 3) appropriate ‘slotting in’ of open-class elements has to be accomplished. The forgoing arguments all seem to be pointing to the fact that rule-based system lacks of necessary efficiency demanded by real-time language processing. The operation of a computationally driven model, therefore, becomes a key issue yet to be resolved. Attempts have been made to explore alternatives to such a neatly generative viewpoint since it fails to adequately address the scale of the problem.

Bolinger perhaps was among the first to direct our attention to the memory aspect of language. He (1975) suggested that language itself is much more memory-based than has been generally considered and that the rule-governed basis of language may have been over emphasized. The most uncompromising argument proposed by Bolinger (1975) is that he questioned whether the rule-based portrayal of language use is characteristic of what language users do most of the time. He (1961, p. 371) argued that language users ‘do at least as much remembering as they do putting together’ for, much of language use is, in fact, repetitive, and not particularly creative. As he (1976) puts it, our language does not expect us to build everything starting with lumber, nails, and blueprint, but provides us with an incredibly large number of prefabs, which have the magical property of persisting even when we knock some of them apart and put them together in unpredictable ways.

Following a similar line of argument, Fillmore speculated that the vast repertory of idioms, fixed phrases, clichés, and speech formulas are ‘memorised’ rather than ‘generated’ in the sense that they are fixed expressions whose interpretations and functions could not be predicted by somebody who merely knew the grammar and the vocabulary of the language. (Fillmore, 1979, p. 91-92)

This position was also taken by Pawley and Syder (1983) who pointed out:

Native speakers do not exercise the creative potential of syntactic rules to anything like their full extent, and ... indeed if they did so they would not be accepted as exhibiting nativelike control of the language. (Pawley and Syder, 1983, p. 193)

According to Pawley and Syder (1983), native speakers produce utterances by starting with memorised sentences and phrases. The use of 'formulas' like 'I'm sorry to have kept you waiting' frees up processing time so that native speakers can better plan their speech. Therefore, formulas become 'the normal building blocks of fluent spoken discourse' and 'provide models for the creation of many (partly) new sequences' (p. 208). Pawley and Syder (1983) thus concluded:

Fluent and idiomatic control of a language rests to a considerable extent on knowledge of a body of 'sentence stems' which are 'institutionalised' or 'lexicalised.' A lexicalised sentence stem is a unit of clause length or longer whose grammatical form and lexical content is wholly or largely fixed; its fixed elements form a standard label for culturally recognised concept, a term in the language. (1983, p. 191-192)

In effect, following the mounting questioning of the rule-based interpretation of language use, memory base of language has been increasingly recognised in the last several decades. As Gleason noted,

We have in recent years become so enthralled with the admitted power of generative systems, that **memory as an important process**, and the possibly **vast store of memorised units** we each call upon every day, have somehow fallen into disrepute. ... It is probably safe to say that we are not as endlessly creative as we are wont to think. (Gleason, 1982, p.355; emphasis added)

B. The Dual-nature Viewpoint

The idea that language may not be entirely rule-governed and produced afresh each time it is used is not new. Idioms, as exceptions for rules, are considered a problem for Chomskyan grammar (Chafe 1968 cited in Weinert, 1995). Knowledge of these, like so much lexical knowledge, is a matter of memory (Widdowson, 1989). Viewing a wide range of word combinations being placed on 'a scale of variability', Widdowson (1989, p. 133) postulated that at one end of the spectrum is 'fixed phrases that cannot be dismantled' and 'compound lexical items in suspended syntactic animation', while 'collocational clusters which can be freely adjusted as sentence constituents' are placed at the other end of the spectrum. He proposed 'the variable application of grammatical rules' along the spectrum in understanding competence of language use while reminding us of 'the limits of analysability' (ibid). Rules are variably applied because these units (along the spectrum) 'call for different degree of adaptation to meet syntactic constraints and the requirements of context' (Widdowson, 1989, p.135). Based on this line of argumentation, Widdowson (1989, P. 135) asserted that 'rules are not generative but regulative and subservient'.

In explaining the way in which meaning arises from language text, Sinclair (1991) presented 'open-choice principle' and the 'idiom principle' as two simultaneously available speaker strategies. The 'idiom principle' is that 'a language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments' while the 'open-choice principle' being defined as 'the normal way of seeing and describing language', based on which 'virtually all grammars are constructed' (Sinclair, 1991, p. 110). To put it simpler, the two principles refer respectively to the use of formulaic sequences (i.e. idioms, proverbs, jargon expressions, phrasal verbs and collocations) and the use of individual words and grammar rules. Sinclair argues that 'language users primarily apply the idiom principle since it interprets most of the text' and that 'even if the interpretive process switches to the open-choice principle, it quickly switches back'. He sees the choices which are grammatically interpreted as 'unusual', and serving as 'an affirmation of the operation of the idiom principle' (Sinclair, 1991, p. 114). In simplified terms, native speakers primarily turn to those ready-made formulaic sequences rather than creating utterances from or analyzing them into single words in preparing our utterances or comprehending others. From this view, it necessarily follows that the 'open-choice principle' is secondary to the 'idiom principle'. That is to say, native speakers primarily apply the idiom principle since it interprets most of the text and that, even if the interpretive process switches to the open-choice principle, it quickly switches back again. The predominance of the idiom principle, according to Sinclair (1991, p. 110), can be explained by the following three: the pressures of real-time conversation, the similarity of human experience, and what he calls 'the economy of effect'. Although the memory system may be redundantly structured due to the fact that 'the same words may be stored in different locations' and 'will form parts of numerous different idiomatic structures' (Skehan, 1992, p. 186), it is this redundancy that contributes for 'the economy of effect', the efficiency in the speakers' retrieval and hearers' processing.

Garnering insights from the existing literature, Skehan (1998) suggested a dual representation system of language, viz. two systems coexist, the rule-based analytic, on the one hand, and the memory-based, on the other. He stated:

In the former case, compact storage and powerful generative rules operate together to 'compute' well-formed sentences. In the latter, the central role is occupied by the a very large, redundantly structured memory system, ... (Skehan, 1998, p. 54)

It is argued that, rather than always following a generative, rule-governed system, language users are adept at shifting in and out of an analytical mode (see, e.g., Sinclair, 1991; Widdowson, 1989). In other words, language users can move between the two systems, and do so quite naturally (Skehan, 1998). Thus viewed, the dual-nature viewpoint of language seems to be a no-lose proposition.

III. MIMICRY-MEMORISATION AND AUDIOLINGUALISM

In foreign language education, repetition and memorisation has long been imprinted with the mark of language learning with Chinese characteristics. Consequently, these features are being indiscriminately interpreted as primitive and obsolete according to current Western notions of English language teaching. Learning or teaching methods adopted by ‘cultural Others’ (Pennycook, 1996, p. 218) are seen as deficient rather than different. Memorisation has long been derided as outmoded or inferior pedagogical practice along with its assumed Chinese birthmark. It could be argued that this is a kind of cultural imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) as ‘there is no reason to suppose that one culture of learning is superior to another’ (Kennedy, 2002, p. 442). As a matter of fact, Imitation and memorisation is by no means unique to so-called Chinese way of learning. In other words, heavy use of memorisation is not non-existent in pedagogies of Western origin. A pertinent example is Audiolingual Method (ALM) (Lado, 1948, 1964) which flourished in the mid-20th century in the West.

A. *A Historical Review of Audiolingualism*

An early version of ALM came to be known as the ‘Army method’ because of its birth in a military context. Methodologically, the audiolingual method was also seen to have grown partly out of a reaction against the limitations of the grammar-translation method (e.g. relying heavily on teaching grammar and practising translation), and partly out of urgent war-time demands for fluent speakers of other languages (cf. Griffiths & Parr, 2001). During World War II, in order to provide American soldiers with at least basic verbal communication skills in foreign languages, the method was created in the Army Specialised Training Program in which soldier students had to memorize useful dialogues as perfectly as possible, from the materials prepared by linguists. Linguists insisted on the imitation and memorization of basic conversational sentences as spoken by native speakers and the students were drilled until they could rattle off the dialogues with ease (Lado, 1964).

The apparent paradox needs to be addressed, as to why, against a backdrop in Western 20th education where memorisation was falling out of favour, ALM, a language teaching methodology heavily based in memorisation, was introduced in the 1950s. Two principal factors were thought to be relevant: first, as a result of the emergence of linguistics as the controlling discipline for language teaching, a particular brand of linguistics happened to be in its prime time – e.g. preoccupation with linguistic forms, the view of fluency as automatic manipulation of those forms as responses to verbal or nonverbal stimuli; second, there was a shift from focus on the written mode to focus on the spoken mode¹ (see Scott, 1983 for more discussion).

Historically reviewed, the language teaching revolution of the 1950s was seen to be represented by a methodology (ALM) that was constructed by merging the concepts of a particular version of descriptive linguistics (structuralism) with the concepts of a particular version of a theory of human learning (behaviourism) with a confused notion of the nature of a language system (speech) (cf. Scott, 1983).

It cannot be denied that the era of Audio-Lingual supremacy in foreign language instruction was relatively short-lived and Lado’s (1957, 1964) work is of little current influence. ALM fell from favour in FLT in the 1970s following eventual reaction against Lado’s implementation of his theory in the ALM, although it is too early to conclude that this teaching method has died out in the Western language classrooms. In an attempt to explain why ALM became unfashionable, N. Ellis (2002, p.177) concludes among other things²:

Despite his [Lado’s] premise of language learning as the learning of patterns of expression, content, and their association, the ALM involved ‘mimicry-memorisation’ in pattern drills in which the role of understanding was minimised as much as possible.

Given this explication, it would seem that memorisation was extensively utilised at the expense of meaning in ALM as ‘the major emphasis was on the mechanical production of the utterance as a language form’ (Ellis, 2002, p.177). One caveat made for ALM is that this method, at its worst, may involve ‘mindless repetition and meaningless drills’ (ibid). In a word, the fact that ALM failed to have continuing influence in language teaching might be attributable to Lado’s operationalization of behaviourist principles (cf. Skinner, 1957) of learning ‘at the expense of language and the learner’ (Ellis, 2002, p 177). It was criticised for being ‘formulated by linguists to satisfy the interests and beliefs of linguists, with little regard for the intellectual and psychological motivations of teachers and learners’ (Scott, 1983, p.15) and the excessive dependence on manipulation drills of this method ‘most certainly resulted in de-humanising the teaching and learning of foreign languages’ (Scott, 1983, p. 17). Thus, a more humanistic way of learning, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), came into being partly as a reaction to the deficiency of ALM.

B. *Memorisation in Audiolingualism*

ALM heavily depended on drills, repetition and substitution exercises, which were justified according to behaviourist theory (Skinner, 1957). The behaviourist epistemology takes the view that language is a system of habits which can be

¹ What Scott (1983) thought remarkable, and therefore revolutionary about this shift in focus in the 1950s, was the claim that the only proper approach to the learning of a foreign language was one that required the student to achieve first an oral mastery of the basic sound and sentence patterns of the language, and this shift occurred ‘even in the absence of compelling social, cultural, and political needs for learners to become speakers of foreign languages’ (Scott, 1983, p. 15). This shift may legitimise or be legitimised by the one of the favourite linguistic aphorisms of the day, i.e. ‘Language is speech, not writing’ (Moulton, 1963).

² Another popular explanation is that progress in behaviourist theories of language learning floundered following Chomsky’s highly influential critique of Skinner’s *Verbal Behaviour* (Ellis, 2002).

taught and learned on a stimulus-response-reinforcement basis. Thus, imitation, repetition and memorization naturally become the core ingredients of ALM as are indicated by the term ‘mimicry-memorization’, a primary teaching technique adopted in this method. The students are expected to ‘*mimic* the dialogue and eventually *memorize* it’ (Krashen, 1987, p. 129-130; emphasis original). The laws of language learning³ underpinning ALM state that the more frequently and intensely a response is practiced, the longer it is remembered. Taking foreign language learning as basically a mechanical process of the formation and performance of habits (Brooks, 1964; Rivers, 1964), audiolingualists emphasized the importance of reinforcing the ‘habit’ through imitation, repetition and practice. This said, holding certain materials (e.g. sentence patterns) in memory seems to be a tacit goal in the audiolingualist views of language learning. The necessity of memorising certain language instances seems fundamental to the underlying principles of ALM. For its proponents, the only issues under discussion are: what utterances are to be chosen for memorization (e.g. poetry, reading selections or conversational material; isolated sentences or connected dialogue) and how much has to be memorized (cf. Lado, 1964).

The practice of memorising useful dialogues, according to Lado (1964, p. 62), gives the students ‘the power to hear, recall, understand, and speak the material’ and thus helps them establish a ‘linguistic beachhead’. This is to say, the memorised conversational basics can enable the students to master the necessary bits of language in order to move towards a higher grade of dialogues. The incremental memorisation of dialogues or other materials produces a ‘snowball effect’, referring to the process that starts from an initial state of small magnitude or significance and gradually builds upon itself, becoming larger in space or deeper in degree. Utterances previously memorized by the students are supposed to contribute to the understanding or mastery of later introduced ones, thus adding to their ‘beachhead’ in the target language. It is hoped that ‘[A]fter the first few dialogues, the student may know enough of the language to understand new dialogues with the explanation of a few new words in the target language itself’ (Lado, 1964, p. 68). Clearly, memorisation is meant to be functioning as a strategic tool through which learning reinforces itself in a virtuous circle.

The chief value in memorisation, from an audiolingualist viewpoint, lies in being able to provide the student with ‘authentic sentences that he can vary and expand and eventually use in many situations’ (Lado, 1964, p. 62). On this view, it is not the audiolingualists’ intention to render the students parrot learners who are merely able to imitate and repeat what is memorised. Instead, the ultimate goal of memorisation is to enable the students to use the sentence patterns contained in the dialogues they commit to memory in a creative manner. Taking this logic step further, Lado speculates,

If our students could memorise large amount of the language, say ten plays or a full-length novel, they might be pretty advanced in the language. (Lado, 1964, p. 62)

A corollary of this is that the quantity of memorisation also counts, namely, how much is memorised. Following this reasoning, the ALM perspective implies that a considerable amount of language instances learned by heart may significantly increase the possibility of being highly proficient in the target language.

Quite obviously, memorisation was so central to a popular methodology half a century ago in the Anglophone West that it was viewed as a necessity rather than a choice. Although since the late 1960s there had been adverse criticism levelled at ALM as well as its proponents, there has been a dearth of informed and unprejudiced discussions of ‘why it was that, for about fifteen years, this Method did in fact gain such recognition and acceptance as to merit the opinion that the era of Audio-Lingual supremacy was indeed the era of a revolutionized approach to foreign language teaching’ (Scott, 1983, p. 15).

IV. AN ENDNOTE

Recent development in applied linguistics, psycholinguistics and corpus linguistics (see, e.g. Bolinger, 1975; Ellis, 1993, 2001, 2002, 2003; Fillmore, 1979; Gleason, 1982; Myles, Hooper, & Mitchell, 1998; Myles, Mitchell, & Hooper, 1999; Sinclair, 1991; Skehan, 1998) has led to increasing recognition of the memory-based aspect of language. Consequently, theory in ALM as well as its pedagogical practice or implications in foreign language learning was recently reappraised from an applied psycholinguistic perspective after 50 years of exile (see Ding & Qi, 2001; Y.-R. Ding, 2004, 2007; Ellis, 2002; Yu, 2009, 2010). For instance, both Ding’s (2007) qualitative study and Yu’s (2009) experimental study produced the result that memorisation facilitates ‘noticing’ and learning chunks and consequently improve the quality of their language production. It is argued here that ‘mimicry-memorisation’ as is involved in ALM might be re-examined and more research are needed to address the problem as to how the memory aspect of language can be reflected and pragmatically applied in language teaching program.

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³ The two laws are ‘law of exercise’ and ‘law of intensity’ (cf. Lado, 1964, p. 37).

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