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Functionalism and Innatism: A Matter of Choice or a Matter of Coordination in SLA?

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Abstract

When the process of SLA is discussed, many theories and aspects emerge into one's mind. But all the factors and theories can be classified under two important theories: innatism and functionalism. In other words, all the theories and factors related to SLA can be classified into two important theories which play a major role in SLA: innatism as an internal focus of attention and functionalism as an external focus of attention. Different articles and books were written by taking into account these two points of view. But the moot question does still exist: which one seems more plausible and why? In order to answer this question, it has been tried to describe the UG, functionalism and their relations to SLA as well as their roles in interlanguage separately. Then an attempt has been made to specify the role of them in the process of SLA. It is concluded that SLA as a labyrinth and many sided processes, cannot be attained by focusing on only one theory as an only phenomenon in the realm of second language learning.

Keywords*:* functionalism, innatism, interlanguage, SLA

I. INTRODUCTION

Ability to use a language requires a complex of knowledge and skills that is automatically available to everyone when they acquire L1 as a child. However, a comparable level is seldom achieved in L2, even if learners expend a great deal of time and effort on the learning task. But, what is L2 and what processes are involved in and can be scrutinized in this regard?

The term L2 acquisition/L2 learning, as a sub-discipline of applied linguistics, refers to the process through which language learners learn/acquire another language. Second language refers to any language in addition to the learner's mother tongue/first language. SLA is also closely intertwined with several disciplines including linguistics, sociolinguistics, psychology, neuroscience, and education (Sadighi, 2014, 1).

On the basis what is stated above, different processes can be considered in order to answer the question about SLA. It means that different linguistic approaches have explored the basic questions about SLA with either an internal or an external focus of attention. Views on what is being acquired range from underlying knowledge of highly abstract linguistic principles and constraints, to ability to structure and convey information in a second language; views on how SLA takes place differ in their emphasis on continued innate UG capacity for language learning or on requirements of communicative processing; views on why some learners are more or less successful range from factors which are largely internal to language and mind, to explanations which involve communicative need and opportunity. To gain an in-depth, "stereoscopic" understanding of L2 acquisition, we unquestionably need to view the process through more than one lens (Saville-Troike, 2006, 67).

But, it is obvious that every theory that is taken into account can use either an internal or an external focus of attention. In other words, in each aspect, internally or externally, the trace of the UG or the functional approach is more prominent than the others. Proponents of Universal Grammar believe that language ability is innate, whereas Functionalists believe that we develop language primarily because of a need to communicate. Which theory plays a major role in SLA? Can UG pave the way for SLA on its own or the functionalist approach by itself? Or can it be said that SLA will be attained by focusing on both UG and Functionalism hand in hand? Or one of them is more important, e.g. UG, than the other such as functionalism?

These questions entail through and comprehensive studies in the labyrinth realm of UG and functionalism. So, it is logical to study UG and functionalism at length one by one to reach a logical, rationale, and plausible answer.

II. UG AND SLA

UG has been considered as a system of principles and parameters which provide constraints on grammars in the course of L1 acquisition, as well as on adult native-speaker grammars. L2 learners face a task parallel to that of L1 acquirers, namely the need to arrive at a linguistic system which accounts for the L2 input, allowing the learner to understand and speak the second language. Given this apparent similarity, the question of whether UG also mediates L2 acquisition, and to what extent, has been investigated and debated since the early 1980s (White, 2003).

Saville-Troike (2006) put forth three important questions in the study of SLA from a UG perspective:

1. What is the initial state in SLA?
2. What is the nature of Interlanguage, and how does it change over time?
3. What is the final state in SLA?

A. Initial State

The term initial state is variously used to mean the kind of unconscious linguistic knowledge that the L2 learner starts out with in advance of the L2 input and/or to refer to characteristics of the earliest grammar (White, 2003). In fact, learners already have knowledge of L1 at the point where L2 acquisition begins. As Schwartz and Eubank (1996) point out, the interlanguage initial state was a neglected topic until the mid-1990s. When it is said that learners already have knowledge of L1 at the point where L2 acquisition begins, it actually means that they already have made all of the parametric choices that are appropriate for that L1, guided by UG. Some L1 knowledge is clearly transferred to L2, although the transfer of exact feature and the extent of it depend on the relationship of L1 and L2, the circumstances of L2 learning, and other factors. When L1 and L2 parameter settings for the same principle are the same, positive transfer from L1 to L2 is likely; when L1 and L2 parameter settings are different, negative transfer or interference might occur (White, 2003, 58).

In addition to the different mentioned factors, the moot statement does still exist: L2 learners may still have access to UG in the initial state of SLA as well as knowledge of L1, but there is no agreement on this.

Needless to say that there isn't any decisive and definite answer to the accessibility to UG in initial sate. White (2003) summarized this accessibility in three terms: no access, direct access and indirect access. In accord with Cook and Newson (2007, p. 231), "in the 1980s the role of UG in L2 learning was expressed as a metaphor of "access" to UG". Drawing on the state metaphor, they discuss four alternatives for the role of UG in the initial state on SLA which are as follows (cited in Sadighi, 2014):

1. L2 learner possess no UG, i.e. No UG Hypothesis
2. L2 learner enjoy a second copy of UG, i.e. Full Access Hypothesis
3. L2 leaners own UG as combined in the L1 steady state, i.e. Full Transfer/ Full Access Hypothesis
4. L2 leaners partially expand on UG, i.e. Partial Access Hypothesis

B. Interlanguage

The term 'interlanguage' was initially proposed by Larry Selinker stated that interlanguage is a linguistic system that is used by the L2 learners and it is influenced by the L1 (mother tongue) (Ellis, 1997, 33).

Saville-Troike (2006) named interlanguage as 'transfer', meaning a transition of prior knowledge from L1 to L2, as one of the processes that is involved in interlanguage development. Further, she identifies two types of transfer: positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurs when an L1 structure or rule is used in an L2 utterance and that use is appropriate or "correct" in the L2.Meanwhile, negative transfer occurs when an L1 structure or rule is used in an L2 utterance and that use is inappropriate and considered an

"error." In this process of transfer, the aspects of language involved are vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and all other aspects of language structure and use.

L2 learner's interlanguage is a transitional system developed by a learner of an L2 which is getting close to the target language developmentally: keeping some features of their L1, or overgeneralization L2 linguistic rules in their production of the target language. The interlanguage system can be formed by factors such as: transfer from L1, transfer of training, L2 learning strategies like simplification, L2 communication strategies like circumlocution, and overgeneralization of the L2 language patterns (Sadighi, 2014, p. 5). Also other points such as interlanguage on the basis of psychology, interlanguage as a microstructure of linguistics and interlanguage pragmatics should be considered as well (Sadighi, 2014). But what is the nature and development of interlanguage regarding UG.

C. Nature and Development of Interlanguage

Within the Principles and Parameters perspective, Interlanguage (IL) is defined as intermediate states of L2 development (IL1 , IL2 , IL3 , etc.), which is compatible with the notion of IL as "interim grammars" that was introduced in the 1960s and 1970s. If it is proven that L2 learners have at least some access to UG, then the L2 learners reset the parameters of the input of the new language process to develop the interlanguage process. For example, the L1 speaker of Japanese who is learning English L2 needs to reset the Head Direction parameter from head-final to head-initial contrary to the L1 speaker of English who is learning Japanese (Saville-Troike, 2006).

The changes of the parameter setting by the learners, usually unconsciously, is due to the fact that the L2 input they receive does not match the L1 settings they have. The availability of UG will limit the L2 learners' choices and consequently their IL will never deviate from structures that are allowed by UG.

Providing that learning principles are part of the language faculty and are also still available, then positive evidence and Negative evidence can provide necessary information to make changes and reset parameters (Saville-Troike, 2006).

Of particular relevance for L2 learners and teachers is the critical role of lexical acquisition in providing information for parameter (re)setting and other aspects of grammar in a UG approach. According to Constructionism, an approach to SLA within Chomsky's Minimalist Program, considers IL development as the progressive mastery of L2 vocabulary along with the morphological features which specify word form that are part of lexical knowledge. While the general principles and parameters that constitute UG do not need to be learned, "morphological paradigms must gradually be added to the lexicon, just like words" (White, 2003 p.194).

D. Final State

The final state shows the end of the product of language transfer, which is the outcome of L1 and L2 learning. In the L2 context, L2 final state is native or native-like

competence (although it might be impossible that one could be native for his L2). If the intermediate state undergoes positive transfer, some learners reach "near-native" or "native-like" competence in L2 along with native competence in L1. Otherwise, if the intermediate state undergoes a negative transfer, it would cease at some point to make further progress toward the learning target in response to L2 input, resulting in a final state which still includes instances of L1 interference or creative structures different from any that would be produced by a native speaker of the L2 (a "frozen" state of progress known as fossilization in SLA).

III. FUNCTIONALISM

All the mentioned points, ideas, and explanations are related to UG as an internal focus in SLA. Conversely, many researchers have rather chosen to take an external focus on language learning. The more influential of these approaches are based on the framework of Functionalism. Functionalists assume that the human need to communicate forms the basis for our language ability and emphasize contextual and social factors. It should be noted that functional models of analysis date back to the early twentieth century, and have their roots in the Prague School of linguistics that originated in Eastern Europe. They consider language primarily as a system of communication rather than as a set of rules.

Approaches to SLA which are characterized as functional differ in emphasis and definition but share the following characteristics in general opposition to those in the Chomskyan tradition:

1. Focus is on the use of language in real situations (performance) as well as underlying knowledge (competence). No sharp distinction is made between the two.
2. Study of SLA begins with the assumption that the purpose of language is communication, and that development of linguistic knowledge (in L1 or L2) requires communicative use.
3. Scope of concern goes beyond the sentence to include discourse structure and how language is used in interaction, and to include aspects of communication beyond language.

A. Different Approaches

On the basis of Saville-Troike (2006) four approaches within the Functionalist framework are of importance when it comes to SLA:

1. System Linguistics
2. Functional Typology
3. Function-to-form Mapping
4. Information Organization

The first approach, System Linguistics, was "developed by M.A.K. Halliday in the late 1950s" (Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 56), and focuses on the circumstances and contexts of language use, since languages cannot be idealized or generalized, as in a Chomskyan manner. "[I]n Halliday's view it is not a system of rules which govern language structure, but rather "meaning potential"" (Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 57). System Linguistics thus focuses on developing meaning, serving as the primary function of language. As Saville-Troike aptly notes, "[o]ne application of Halliday's model to the study of SLA comes with seeing L2 learning as a process of adding multilingual meaning potential to what has already been achieved in L1".

The second Functional approach is Functional Typology, which focuses on differences and similarities between many languages of the world by means of what is called 'markedness'. As defined by Saville-Troike (2006), this is "[a] basis for classification of languages according to whether a specific feature occurs more frequently than a contrasting element in the same category, is less complex structurally or conceptually, or is more "normal" or "expected" along some dimension (rendering it "unmarked" as opposed to "marked" in that respect)".

Expected and frequent features are thus 'unmarked', while variant or irregular and infrequent or rare features are considered as 'marked'. This notion of markedness becomes relevant for L2 learning when one compares the differences in markedness between two languages. It follows that "unmarked features in L1 are more likely to transfer, as well as that marked features in L2 will be harder to learn" (Saville-Troike, 2006). This is known as the Markedness Differential Hypothesis, which thus facilitates predictions on the learnability of L1 and L2.

The third Functional approach, function-to-form mapping, focuses on the idea that "acquisition of both L1 and L2 involves a process of grammaticalization in which a grammatical function is first conveyed by shared extralinguistic knowledge and inferencing based on the context of discourse, then by a lexical word, and only later by a grammatical marker" (Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 60). In other words, there is a clear order or sequence in which speaker competence develops: first the speaker needs to rely heavily on contextual factors due to their limited knowledge, which are then gradually replaced by appropriate lexical items and finally replaced by the appropriate grammatical marker. Thus, at first the speaker uses very little grammar while later on grammar is used extensively. This process is known as grammaticalization and is caused by the need to communicate with others and is basic to L1 and L2 acquisition.

The fourth and final approach within the Functionalist framework is information organization, an approach focusing primarily on utterance structure, which is "the way in which learners put their words together" (Klein and Perdue, 1993). When it comes to L2 acquisition, describing utterance structure therefore means describing interlanguage structure, that is, structures between the initial and final state of L2 development, from a communicational perspective. The aim is to uncover what "organizational principles guide learners' production at various stages of development" (Saville-Troike 62). In short, these

principles consist of constraints and are linked to the process of grammaticalization discussed above under function-to-form mapping.

B. Functionalism and Interlanguage

Functional approach to learners' interlanguage is concerned with the ways in which second language learners set about making meaning and achieving their personal communicative goals. It is argued that the great variety of interlanguage forms produced by second language learners cannot be sensibly interpreted unless we also pay attention 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. Further, it is argued that these meaning-making efforts on the part of learners are a driving force in ongoing second language development, which interacts with the development of formal grammatical systems (Mitchell and Myles, 2004).

Mitchell and Myles (2004, p. 155) criticize the formal system for being still in an underdeveloped state. They state that "functionalism has demonstrated the wide range of devices (lexical and pragmatic as well as formal) which interlanguage users deploy in order to convey meaning.

IV. DISCUSSION

By referring to the relationship between innatism and SLA and functionalism and SLA, it can be claimed that SLA is not a matter of either …or. It means that the existence of one of the theories does not indicate the lack of the other. In other words, they are not mutually exclusive. Rather they are a matter of both… and – behave like a complement to each other. Consequently, both theories should be available to help learners in SLA. For example, given that SLA is like a puzzle, completing this puzzle needs internal and external factors both of which are in the realm of innatism and functionalism. Both approaches to language ability do not completely exclude each other since they essentially aim to describe the same phenomena but merely with a different focus or emphasis. So every aspect, externally or internally, will be useful in the process of helping learners in SLA. In one hand, the innatists state that UG is important and they support their viewpoint by referring to the ‘logical problem of language acquisition’, or in Chomskyan terms the poverty-of-the-stimulus argument, in which children are able to master the complexities of a language system in a relatively short time at a relatively young age whereas adult second language (L2) learners need considerably more time and will never be able to reach the level of a first language (L1) speaker. On the other hand, the functionalists state that mere attention to internal factors and above all UG is not sufficient to learn a language. The interaction should exist to convey the meaning and use the language appropriately. Therefore, both theories are needed to play their role hand in hand to oil the wheels of SLA.

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