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CREATIVE

IS LANGUAGE ?

**comparing the behaviourist and
transformational approaches to
grammar**

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How Creative Is Language?

Comparing the Behaviourist and Transformational Approaches to Grammar

There is no doubt today that generative grammar, attributed largely to the groundbreaking work of Noam Chomsky, has opened up new perspectives to linguistics, particularly noticeable in its practical application to language teaching. Although considerably controversial, his theories managed to create a sort of 'tabula rasa' on which further developments in language theory were able to take place. In relation to language teaching, the old-fashioned 'behaviourist' model which had dominated up until Chomsky's time was brought into question and people began to look at 'creativity' in language in a totally new way. His theory of *transformational grammar* in which creative use of language was seen as the application of universal grammatical principles and structures added a new element to the study of language, affecting inevitably the entire field of linguistics: language for the first time was considered in terms of abstract cognitive processes that could be understood purely on a structural level.

Theoretical developments that have taken place since the advent of Chomsky have however brought his whole range of theoretical ideas into question, resulting from widespread dissatisfaction with a theory that does not take into consideration the significance of the social environment in which language events take place, including a large scale neglect of socially contextualised lexically-based structures within spoken discourse. These new ideas suggest that the processing and application of language is not nearly so 'creative' as would be suggested by Chomsky's theories, and the emphasis has been put back on a lexical level: words and the contexts in which they are spoken are considered necessary for the understanding of language and meaning. The new developments have resulted in a dramatic distinction between a 'Chomskyan' *open-choice principle* in which words are fitted into open slots based on purely structural distinctions, and the *idiom principle*, in which it is stressed that a great deal of language output is based on the recitation of fixed speech patterns fitting into specific social contexts. In this paper we will be discussing the arisal of both theoretical areas and exploring their significance and application within the field of linguistics. It will quickly become clear that both perspectives have been important in theoretical and practical terms, and that the acceptance of one does not necessarily mean the rejection of the other.

First we will briefly consider the theories of Chomsky. His ground-breaking and highly controversial work stated that language is in fact not a "form of behaviour" but "an intricate rule-based system." (Harmer, 1991). This stood strongly against the then existing 'behaviourist' theories, and his standpoint was based on a model that presented two keywords: *competence* and *performance*. *Competence* in linguistic terms is a person's

unconscious knowledge of the system of rules of a language which enable production and understanding of an indefinite number of sentences and recognition of grammatical mistakes and ambiguities. *Performance* is taken to be the practical realisation of these relatively abstract structures inherent within the human brain. *Performance* was completely subservient to *competence*, and the 'grammar' on which this competence is based was considered to be the basic structure on which all learning could take place, leaving not much open for pragmatically influenced factors. In his model, 'universal' structures existed which could be used creatively by the language speaker to create new sentences, and this forms the basic theoretical idea for the 'open-choice principle' introduced previously. Sinclair (1991) describes this principle as "probably the normal way of seeing and describing language," being envisaged as a 'slot-and-filter' model in which text is made up of "a series of slots which have to be filled from a lexicon which satisfies local restraints." Chomsky's standpoint was an 'extreme' theoretical view which opened the doors to further developments in the field of language. Harmer comments on the influence Chomsky's theories have had on language teaching methodologies:

"Language teaching has never adopted a methodology based on Chomsky's work. But the idea that language is not a set of habits has informed many teaching techniques and methodologies."

(Harmer, 1991, pg. 33).

Extreme theoretical positions of any kind are usually followed by an inevitable backlash, resulting in eventual fusion within a larger theoretical model. In the case of Chomsky it is no less true. The primary dissatisfaction in the world of linguistics was with the notion of 'creativity' that is presented in Chomsky's model. Although it is true that syntactic structures do tend to reoccur and help us to structure language, according to a great deal of theoreticians who reacted against the work of Chomsky, we "do *not* exercise the creative potential of syntactic rules to anything like their full extent" (Carter & McCarthy, 1988). Referring directly to Pawley & Hodgetts for more explanatory material, it is demonstrated that as a participant in talk exchange it is also necessary to attend to other requirements besides grammaticality: "a speaker is expected to make contributions to conversation that are coherent, sensitive to what has gone on before and what might happen later, and sensitive to audience knowledge and other features of the social situation." It is clear then, that "control of a language must entail knowledge of something more than a generative grammar." (Pawley & Hodgetts, 1983). In this paper we will be primarily analysing the theoretical methodology that has resulted in creating new discourse-based ways of looking at a language based not on the fulfilling of grammatical rules but the socially inscribed use of lexical formulas.

An important development on the now almost infamous theories of Chomsky was Dell Hymes's influential work on *communicative competence*. In his important article On Communicative Competence (1972) Chomsky's notion of *competence* was extended to include sociolinguistic factors which, according to Hymes, also play an important role in the way native speakers choose between 'appropriate' and 'not appropriate' sentences. Widdowson, in his commentary on the role of lexis in understanding meaning, commented that "Hymes proposed his concept of communicative competence in reaction to Chomsky, and it is customary to present it as an improvement in that it covers aspects

of language other than the narrowly grammatical.” (Widdowson, 1989). Hymes saw Chomsky’s work as being highly important for a cognitive understanding of language, but as too abstract for use in a socially and culturally vital world: “Chomsky’s theoretical standpoint [. . .] carries to its perfection the desire to deal in practice only with what is internal to language.” In reaction to Chomsky, Hymes stated that “Such a theory of competence posits ideal objects in abstraction from sociocultural features that might enter into their description. [. . .] The theory of performance is the one sector that might have a specific sociocultural content; but while equated with a theory of language use, it is essentially concerned with psychological by-products of the analysis of grammar, not, say, with social interaction.” (Hymes, 1972). This dissatisfaction led to the presentation of a new type of *communicative competence* which would take account of the complex social world in which language events occur. Hymes’ communicative competence is based on an intuitive knowledge of the language itself, and at the same time an ability to use this language in real-life situations. His theories were important in placing grammar back into the context of social life, recognising that Chomsky’s theories were limited and that the process of language learning is not simply an in built system but an interaction between learner and environmental/social needs. Hymes work was primarily important because of its realisation that the rules governing the use of language extend beyond the simply grammatical and into those governed by social existence: “Just as rules of syntax can control aspects of phonology, and just as semantic rules perhaps control aspects of syntax, so rules of speech acts enter as a controlling factor for linguistic form as a whole.” (Hymes, 1972).

It is at this stage that it would be useful to examine the importance of developments within the field of ‘speech-act theory’ and its influence on linguistics. Speech-act theory, like the sociolinguistic *communicative competence* of Hymes, can be seen as forming one element within a larger theoretical reaction against the purity of the structuralist model epitomised by Saussurian linguistics. In the case of speech act theory, language is viewed not in terms of what is *said* but what the ‘speech-act’ itself actually *does* in its utterance (see Austin, 1962). Austin and later Searle were to present the primary pioneering work on this subject, which is involved largely with a study of the ritualization of language events and their repetitive use within culture as determined by social circumstances. The important factor here is that in studying speech-acts there is an implicit realisation of a connection between social context and meaning rather than linguistic form and meaning; in studying speech acts we are acutely aware of the context of any given utterance. In terms of understanding native-like fluency, an understanding of the function of speech-acts within discourse helps us to realise that an integral part of language learning is not in fact the acquisition of abstract grammatical structures but the learning of the contexts in which certain utterances take place. If people were to use language items that fit only into grammatical structures, they would not be considered native speakers. Here the ‘ritualization’ inherent in almost all speech-acts comes to the fore: “Sociological and anthropological theory recognises the importance of ritualization in human behaviour. However, recent linguistics has tended only to emphasize the creativity, and to ignore the stereotyping and standardisation in much language use. As Halliday says, ‘In real life, most sentences that are uttered are not uttered for the first time. A great deal of discourse is more or less routinized’.” (Stubbs, 1983). Speech-act theory, therefore, plays a very important role in understanding the social contextualization of language utterances and

the developments within linguistics that have emerged from this awareness.

Relatively new moves within the field of linguistics have been inevitably influenced by these important theoretical developments, and these socialised views of language utterances have certainly filtered down to the word and sentence level, resulting in what has already been introduced as the 'idiom' principle. This new paradigm for linguistics can be directly seen in Halliday's 'functionalisation' of grammatical principles in which an emphasis is placed on the important role of socially-inscribed lexis in an understanding of meaning at the sentence level. We can open this discussion by considering Widdowson's questioning of both Chomsky's and Hymes' belief in the essential creativity of grammar: "The question arises as to how far knowledge of language is systematic and circumscribed by rule. [. . .] There is a great deal that the native speaker knows of his language which takes the form less of analysed grammatical rules than adaptable lexical chunks. [. . .] A great deal of knowledge seems to consist of formulaic chunks, lexical units completely or partially assembled in readiness for use." (Widdowson, 1989). His primary opinion is that a new *communicative competence* model should be distanced from the 'open-choice' principle because language expression "is much more a matter of knowing a stock of partially preassembled patterns, formulaic frameworks, and a kit of rules." According to Widdowson, Chomsky cannot be 'incorporated' into in a new theory of *communicative competence*. Sinclair (1991) can help us further: "the open-choice principle does not provide for substantial enough restraints on consecutive choices." In this he means that if a given speaker was to simply follow grammatical rules, he would have an enormously wide choice of utterances: there must be other restrictions that affect the way native-speakers make choices. The idiom principle is based on the presupposition that words are not considered simply as 'units' fulfilling grammatical rules and functions, but rather as units that have an essential meaning based connection with one another that helps to structure the resulting discourse. It is in this sense that one accepts that control of language is involved not with simply the unconscious awareness of abstract grammatical structures, but with an extended lexical knowledge accompanied by an awareness of the appropriateness of given lexical sequences in given social circumstances.

The idiom principle gets its most clear expression in the fixed patterns discussed by Pawley & Hodgetts in the form of 'lexicalised sentence stems'. According to this duo "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 a culturally recognized concept." (Pawley & Hodgett, 1983). The amount of these 'sentence stems' that a normal speaker of English knows "amounts to hundreds of thousands." In this way, language utterances are taken out of the context of 'grammaticality' and placed into the context of socially-based lexical sequences. Referring again to Pawley & Hodgett: "memorised clauses and clause-sequences form a high proportion of the fluent stretches of speech heard in everyday conversation." (Pawley & Hodgett, 1983). They also point out that these 'lexicalised' speech units are in fact more than simply grammatical structures, but are *social institutions*. In saying that a lexical item is a social institution Pawley & Hodgett are referring to the fact that the expression is "a conventional label or a conventional concept, a culturally standardised designation (term) for a socially recognized conceptual category." (Pawley & Hodgett, 1983). Here we can also make a

direct connection with the concept of ritualization inherent within speech-act theory. A lexicalised sentence stem can be defined as follows:

“A sentence stem consists either of a complete sentence, or, more commonly, an expression which is something less than a complete sentence. In the latter case, the sentence structure is fully specified along with a nucleus of lexical and grammatical morphemes which normally include the verb and certain of its arguments. [. . .] Lexicalised sentence stems may be ‘inflected’ or ‘expanded’, except for a minority of expressions that are completely rigid in their form.”
(Pawley & Hodgett, 1983).

Within the study of lexical systems, contemporary linguists have gradually become aware that an important way of looking at vocabulary is by observing patterns of reoccurrence for particular words in particular circumstances, exemplified by the ‘lexicalised sentence stem.’ This new context-based emphasis has resulted in a concentration on an area of study known as *collocation*. Grammatical terminology is clearly not sufficient to encompass this importance occurrence within language: it has been said that the study of lexis can be described as a ‘more delicate grammar’ (Carter, 1987) within the broad tradition of systemic linguistics. This area of study, receiving relatively new interest within the field of linguistics, is certainly affecting the way language is perceived and taught. A concentration on collocation is one of the major steps within the new linguistics paradigm: words began to be considered not only on a paradigmatic dimension as suggested by the Chomskyan approach, but also on a syntagmatic level where meaning is considered on a word-based, socially-inscribed level. J. R. Firths is considered to be an important figure in this level of research; he was actually responsible for bringing the term itself into linguistic prominence (Carter & McCarthy, 1988). Firth’s notion of collocation was taken further by McIntosh “who considered recurring *lexical* patterns to be just as important as regular *grammatical* ones. The lexical patterns he called **ranges**.” (Carter & McCarthy, 1988). The invention and adoption of this term in the field of linguistics was relatively important because it recognised the need for terminology outside the purely grammatical. It was in 1966 that Halliday presented his paper on the study of lexis. In this paper, Halliday’s aim was to “search for lexical patterns and a lexical theory ‘complementary to, but not part of grammatical theory’.” (Carter & McCarthy, 1988). In this sense, ‘lexical’ meaning was being approached in linguistic terms which was to radicalise the way language events were examined in terms of discourse. According to this theory “grammatical description leaves a lot unaccounted for, which can still be discussed *linguistically*, without the recourse to ‘non-language’ which semantics brings with it.” This new perspective stressed the importance of an understanding of collocation in the broader context of linguistics. Although, according to Carter & McCarthy (1988), the importance of this ‘lexical level’ is yet to be conclusively demonstrated, the argument “that collocation is a significant level of language choice” is quite convincing. In this case, we realise that the co-occurrence of words depends not on the blind following of universal grammatical rules but the repetition of lexical formulas that become learnt in the context of social life. This demonstrates the fact that collocation is a considerably important level of language *performance* and should be considered within the language education field.

Although this new emphasis has resulted in shifting “grammar from its preeminence” and allowing “the rightful claim of lexis” (Widdowson, 1989), from the evidence presented in this paper it is clear that we cannot ignore the importance of structural grammar or elements of the ‘open-choice’ principle when considering language. A primary example is in collocation which can easily be observed from both perspectives: Here the word unit is extended beyond the word itself and into the meaning based context in which words ‘co-occur’. Carter (1987) discusses these patterns of co-occurrence in terms of both a *grammatical* sense—in that they result primarily from syntactic dependencies—and their *lexical* sense—in that, although syntactic relationships are involved the patterns “result from the fact that in a given linguistic environment certain lexical items will co-occur.” (Carter, 1987). Here it is clear that it is impossible to ignore the importance of grammatical terminology when considering the meaning-based role of vocabulary. According to Carter & McCarthy (1988), “neither Halliday nor Sinclair dismisses the importance of grammatical restrictions on co-occurrence.” Pawley and Hodgetts (1983) supply us also with a sort of compromise in which both grammatical and lexically-based concepts are encompassed: “if the native speaker knows certain linguistic forms in two ways, both as lexical units and as products of syntactic rules, then the grammarian is obliged to describe *both* kinds of knowledge; anything less would be incomplete.” (Pawley & Hodgetts, 1983). It is clear then that the new paradigm for language teaching will include a combination of both perspectives, one in which grammatical knowledge is combined with contextually based collocation. Stern (1985) can help us here with his observation that all these theoretical notions are actually only theoretical ‘constructs’; any of this knowledge can be taken and adopted to suit different situations. This is particularly significant to the language classroom where teachers should be given the chance to take on the theoretical compromise that suits the teacher, the teacher’s relationship with the students and the students themselves. This new extended paradigm should allow for co-existence of a multiplicity of theories giving the teacher the ultimate choice about the relationship between grammatical structure and lexical patterning. We can end this discussion with an important statement from Carter (1987):

“Pedagogical treatments of collocations, at least, would be seriously lacking if grammatical patterning were not included alongside lexical patterning and if such elementary distinctions were not made between them.”

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