



Second Language Acquisition

Are Chomsky and Halliday at opposing ends of a theoretical continuum or are they rather the two sides of the same coin?

The failure of Behaviorist theory to account for the phenomenon of language in its infinity of creative potential and abstract generalizational process caused language researchers to ask eventual questions - questions that probed beneath and beyond scientific investigation. One such set of questions was found in a generative approach to child language known as the Nativist Approach. The term 'Nativist' is derived from the fundamental assertion that language acquisition is innately determined, that we are born with a built-in device of some kind that predisposes us to language acquisition. Foremost in the field is Chomsky who claims the existence of innate properties of language to explain the child's mastery of his/her native language in such a short period, despite the highly abstract nature of the rules of language. Thus, for Chomsky human beings are endowed with a 'little black box of sorts, a 'Language Acquisition Device' (LAD) that enables them to acquire any natural human language.

It is 'Universal Grammar' that allows the child to learn the grammar of language, and it is considered innate because the input that the child receives is meager, random and hardly accounts for the language competence shown by the child. According to Chomsky, the child will make certain hypotheses - "Mommy sock", "No the sun is shining", "other one spoon" and in the language acquisition continuum and by the age of 5 the child will have the basics of language under his/her control (Note that the innateness hypothesis presumes that language acquisition takes place independent of cognition and other affective factors). So, a child who has acquired the basics of the language can perform abstract grammatical sentences which are structure dependent. Researchers show that children are able to distinguish the difference between "Mary hit her"/ "Mary hit herself", or avoid making sentences such as "Is the man in the room?"

However, Universal Grammar also constrains the form of the grammars individual languages can take. It sets parameters which must then be fixed according to the input data that the child obtains. For instance the Pro-Drop Parameter is where some languages do not specify the subject as in Sinhala (ex: *ana awa, wahinawa*) as opposed to English where the subject is specified (He came, It is raining). English is thus a Non-Pro-Drop Language. The parameter which is to be set on or off would be then 'off' in the case of English. But everything does not necessarily fit the UG model. There are conceptions - though the non-Pro-drop parameter presupposes that the subject would always be specified, it does not however explain sentences such as - 'more the merrier', 'raining cats and dogs'. Chomsky explains this unmarked use of the language that is part of the peripheral grammar. The rules that child discovers using 3 forms the core, grammar of his language - these rules are 'unmarked'.

However Nativist Approach to language was also seen by linguists to shown inadequacies. It was considered that one would lose much of the workings of language by studying it completely independent the context and detached from the cognitive and affective factors. Chomsky put aside 'meaning' completely in his approach to language, but linguists like Lois Bloom pointed out that meaning is essential, because the relationships in which words occur in telegraphic utterances are only superficially similar.



For example, in the utterance "Mommy sock", which nativists would describe as a sentence consisting of a picot word and an open word. Bloom found at least three possible underlying relations; agent action (Mommy is putting the sock on), agent - object (Mommy sees the sock), and possessor - possessed (Mommy's sock). This multiplicity of meaning cannot be arrived at by just examining the word order. To retrieve meaning it becomes essential to engage with the context of the utterance.

Linguists also pointed out that language reflects certain choices we make or that are made for us. Though Chomsky only concentrates with the internal workings of the language, it is only by looking at the external workings of the language that one can retrieve the reasons for certain choices made in language. Lewis Carroll aptly captures this characteristic of language in "Through the Looking Glass", where Alice argued with Humpty Dumpty about the meaning of words:

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone,
"It means just what I chose it to mean - neither more or less".
"The question is", said Alice, "Whether you can make words mean so many different things."
"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty "which is to be master - that's all".

These are exactly the kind of issues that Functionalists Approach to language tries to address. Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL), is a theory of language centered around the notion of language function. While SFL accounts for the syntactic structure of language, it places the function of language as central (what language does, and how it does it), in preference to more structural approaches, which place the elements of language and their combinations as central. SFL starts at social context, and looks at how language both acts upon, and is constrained by, this social context. SFL grew out of the work of IR Firth, but was mainly developed by his student Michel Halliday.

Functionalists are on the view that language acquisition takes place in random with human cognitive development. While tools allow the species to control the environment directly, language allows the species to control the environment indirectly. It is the Functionalists view that the language evolution of the species is reflected by the language evolution of a human being. According to Halliday, a child will have what is known as a Proto-language that allows it to communicate meaning. By 6 months the child responds to motherese, by 10 he would have about 12 signs, by 12 months 20 signs, by 16 months 50 signs, and by about 5 years half million clauses. The language acquisition moves from a pragmatic mode (bodily gestures), to a mathetic mode.

Unlike Chomsky, for Halliday and the Functionalists, the input that they could receive is sufficient for the acquisition of language. "Motherese" becomes central to the input that the child receives. Empirical studies have been able to show that the mother's speech was remarkably well formed, containing few ungrammatical utterances or sentence fragments. The child will thus engage in a construction of language, receiving and revising input in the process of acquiring the language.

Systematic Functional Theory views language as a social semiotic act, a resource people use to accomplish their purposes by expressing meanings in context. Halliday was of the view that "The value of a theory lies in the use that can be made of it, and I have always considered a theory of language to be essentially consumer oriented." (1985), because language is defined as a systematic resource, the organizing principal in linguistic description a system rather than a structure. Since language is viewed as semiotic potential, the description of language is a description of choice. The available choices depend on aspects of the context in which the language is being used. Functionalists chart these choices on different levels, or strata of language. There are three basic strata; - the semiotic, lexico-grammar, and the phonological. The "linguistic structure" of systematic theory is the "lexico-grammatical" which combines syntax, lexicon and morphology.



He differs from Chomsky since he believes that all three should be combined together. He argues that "grammar cannot be modeled as new sentences made out of old words and fixed stock of vocabulary is never to be replaced combinations" (Halliday, 1985). He shows that in language acquisition we seem to process large chunks of the language.

The unit of analysis for Systematic Functional Linguistics is the text because the functional meaning potential of language is realized in units no smaller than texts. SF Linguistics also try to explain linguistic variation through "Register". Register is important in SFL because it is seen as the linguistic consequence of interacting aspect of context. The framework introduced by Halliday identifies three elements of context or situation: the field, or 'on going activity', tenor or 'role relationship involved, and the mode, or 'the symbolic or rhetorical channel'. Each element of the context has a corresponding language function. The 'ideational' or 'observer' function is 'language as a means of talking about the world' and 'the expression of logical relations'; the 'interpersonal' or 'intruder' function is 'language as a means where by the speaker participates in the speech situation, including roles, attitudes, and judgments. The 'textual' or 'text creating' function is that which distinguish given and new information. It is this systematic, yet indirect, connection between language functions and situational context that makes situated meaning recoverable. The following can be considered as examples for this;

I prefer life in the city
My preference is for life in the city

Both are grammatical, conveying (even though the surface structure differs) the same prepositional context. However, the organization of the two utterances contrasts functionally. At minimum, the two contrast in terms of what is presumed to be the topic under discussion. The two also show contrasting participant relations. The former is considered more direct, more assertive, suggesting more equal, if not also more intimate relations between participants in the discussion. The latter is more indirect, suggesting more unequal or at least more formal. The model thus posits a dynamic, interactive view of relations between text and context, rather than a static, deterministic one.

Are Chomsky and Halliday then at oppose ends of a theoretical continuum or are they rather the two sides of the same coin? Well, at a theoretical level, we encounter Chomsky and Halliday the Plato and Orwell problem. The Chomskian theory of language operates under innateness hypothesis that somehow presumes to be self-evident. However, he backs his claims by pointing out that language is species specific and that it is biologically endowed. Therefore, only humans are capable of language. He also backs his claims of UG by drawing attention to the fact that language is a universal phenomenon learnt in a similar manner, at a similar speed right across the world. Though Chomsky's hypothesis cannot be proven wrong, it however allows criticisms. There are some glaring gaps in Chomskian approach to language such as the way he totally obliterates context and meaning.

It is exactly these aspects of language that Halliday address in his Systematic Functional Linguistics. He does not use principles and parameters to explain away linguistic phenomena, rather he tries to retrieve the functions of language through hierarchically organized linguistic tools.

Competence Vs performance is another issue engaged in regard to language by Chomsky and Halliday. 'Competence' refers to one's underlying knowledge of a system, event, or fact. 'Performance' is the overtly observable and concrete manifestation or realization of competence.



Chomsky linked competence to an "idealized" speaker-hearer who does not display such performance variables as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, errors and hesitation performance such as repeats, false starts, pauses, omissions, and additions. Chomsky's point was that a theory of language has to be a theory of competence lest the linguist vainly try to categorize an infinite number of performance variable which are not reflective of the underlying linguistic ability of the speaker-hearer. Halliday takes his opposite view. According to him one must draw one's conclusions from what is directly observable and that is performance. He points out that even errors, omissions, false starts, repeats, reveal something about the speaker, his/her immediate context and the deeper cultural, ideological context. Halliday's view becomes especially important when one talks about second language learning. Poor structures and other affective factors may be one important manner of explaining why some second language learners show competence (in their writing knowledge of grammar, vocabulary) but fail to perform anywhere near that competence.

It is because of this instance on the multiplicity of meaning that Halliday's influence has even been felt in post-modernist thinking. According to Halliday the organization of text features realizes multiple meanings, yet these meanings cannot simply be 'read' off directly from text structure. Rather, text are viewed as the product of complex multiple interactions between linguistic functions and social contexts. Contents include not only multiple elements but multiple levels. That is, systematic analysis taken into account not only the immediate context in which the text is produced and received but also generic and cultural contexts. Indeed, the inclusion of levels associated with genre and culture makes this model compatible with post-modernist concerns with intellectuality.

Thus, while the Chomskian model does capture some of the finer elements of the phenomenon of language, especially in the area of language acquisition, it however leaves some areas of language unattended to. Language Systematic and language in a situational context that are ignored by Chomsky, is taken up by Halliday who places these two elements central to his approach to language. Halliday does a remarkable job of probing into language as a tool for meaning making within context. Placed in such a light it then becomes crucial to study both of these models to receive a balanced highly argumentative, abet dialectical approach to language.

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