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Abstract: The paper presents an overview of a blended-learning course in English morphology which adopts a systemic-functional perspective of grammar: it approaches grammar as a repository of expressive resources to be employed by language users for meeting their communicative goals rather than a mere list of structures to be described. It guides students through the system of language and uses up-to date and real-life illustrative data to explore its functioning in different settings of social life. The primary goal is to offer students a powerful tool for the analytical evaluation of others', as well as their own, uses of language, and thereby to develop empowered, competent and critical language users.

Key words: English morphology, systemic-functional linguistics, register, systemic-functional grammar, e-learning, blended-learning

Introduction

A course in English morphology is a standard integral part of a linguistic module in various English study programmes. Taught typically within a traditional, i.e. structuralist paradigm, it typically exposes students to a description of the structure of English language and attempts to define and describe its levels of organization and the corresponding units of analysis. Students acquire knowledge of English grammatical system as a relatively autonomous, self-contained entity which is approached as an essential part of their linguistic competence but which to a certain degree remains isolated from other components within their overall communicative competence. In this traditional approach, grammar is in principle represented as a list of structured units with their respective properties, and of rules of their use. Although long-time established and well-elaborated, the approach has reached its limits in that it does not entirely fit the profile of an undergraduate student of English. As a complement to the traditional paradigm we propose adopting a systemic-functional approach which has proven useful in describing and explaining the processes of meaning making in real-life situations which involve the use of language. Its principal standpoint is that language-in-use involves concrete participants with their communicative intentions being displayed, interpreted and acted upon in particular circumstances. At the heart of the processes of meaning-making (semiosis) stands

grammar, which is understood as a pool of semiotic resources whose functionality is fully at language users' disposal to be deployed while they are engaged in the acts of semiosis.

The systemic-functional approach (SFA) goes beyond the standard form-function continuum in the study of language with formal approaches/ grammars and functional (communicative) approaches/grammars as their outcomes (see Table 1). Having in mind the purposes and goals of language instruction, both formal and functional approaches are legitimate and, rather than seeing them as mutually exclusive, they may be viewed as compatible, or even complementary, since either of them must at some point address the issue of form and/or function respectively. Ours is an approach which benefits from a thorough description and characterization of structures which capitalizes on the students' linguistic knowledge, metalanguage and skills acquired in the course of their formal education in their first-language and which uses the notion of communicative function to account for the instrumentality of language in the performance of its users' goals.

| | Type of grammar | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|---|
| | traditional | functional | |
| | | communicative | systemic-functional |
| Perspective on language use | syntagmatic | | syntagmatic and paradigmatic |
| Highest level of analysis | sentence | text | |
| Type of language use studied | written | written, spoken, multimodal | |
| Attention to context | none or minimum | greater | maximum: meaning-making in real-world specimens of concrete genres register |

Table 1: Systemic-functional grammar and traditional vs. functional grammar

1 Systemic-functional grammar: an overview

A strand of functional approach to language which has proved particularly influential is systemic-functional grammar (SFG) which has been developed and elaborated by Michael Halliday and his associates within a broader theory of language called systemic-functional linguistics. This original and ground-breaking theory and method sees language as a system of options for making meaning: while the systemic component stresses the sets of options available to language users (hence, the Saussurean 'paradigmatic' axis is foregrounded, which contrasts with the traditional/formal approaches which focus on the 'syntagmatic' axis), the functional component underlines the belief that language structures are shaped by the

functions language is put to. Halliday's innovative systemic-functional modelling of grammar conceives of language as an instrument which is used to fulfill three macro-functions (metafunctions) simultaneously, viz. *experiential (representational or ideational)* metafunction which expresses language users' interpretation or construal of the world, *interpersonal* metafunction which is used to interact with the social environment in order to enact some change upon it, and *textual* metafunction which is used to organize a message in such a way that it makes sense to interlocutors.

The main point in which SFG departs from other functional approaches is that it conceptualizes language as a system of (paradigmatic) choices made more/less consciously by language users from the pool of total options available to them in their linguistic repertoires rather than as a mere list of (syntagmatic) structures; further, the choices are made within particular contexts. Contextual influence upon language choice is systematically examined within the framework of register analysis, which focuses on three broad areas of the contextual mapping upon language, viz. field, tenor and mode. The three areas are subsumed within the notion of register and may be further described as follows:

FIELD denotes the type social activity performed, its topic, and how much specialisation it requires, the perspective/angle of representation, and the participants' placement in the transitivity structure of the clause;

TENOR denotes the social roles the participants adopt and how they are mutually aligned, participants' projected stances (personas), their relative social status/power (age, function, expertise) relationships, social distance (familiarity vs. distance);

MODE denotes language medium (spoken or written), communication channel (direct face-to-face vs. mediated), interactivity (dialogue vs. monologue), spontaneity (pre-planning vs. unpreparedness), relation of language use to the immediate situation (referential vs. non-referential uses), presence of other semiotic systems (multimodality).

The areas of register can be seen as systematically corresponding to the three metafunctions:

| METAFUNCTION | | REGISTER | |
|-------------------------|--|---|--------------|
| <i>Representational</i> | expressing/organizing/ construing experience | social activity, topic, (non)specialisation, perspective: transitivity structure | <i>Field</i> |
| <i>Interpersonal</i> | interacting with others/enacting social relations | social roles, status, power, distance, stances: mood structure | <i>Tenor</i> |
| <i>Textual</i> | weaving the above functions together to make meaningful messages | medium, channel, interactivity, spontaneity, situational embeddedness: thematic structure , other semiotic systems used | <i>Mode</i> |

Table 2: A summary systemic-functional approach to language

The SFG approach is innovative primarily in offering itself as an instrument for systematic analysis of choices which shape a given use of language and which give discourses coherence. It provides a robust analytical tool for tackling concrete, situationally-embedded uses of language which typically form instances of particular genres, i.e. structured patterns of language practice which have been established by convention, or institutionalized, within a culture to meet particular communicative needs. Genres, however, are established within a system of a culture’s values, beliefs and attitudes which form their ideological standpoint. In fact, we claim that just as much as every use of language is by definition situationally (contextually) embedded, it is also ideologically rooted in its user’s (conscious or unconscious) value systems (see Figure 1) which form a culture’s ideological superstratum. It is the SFG’s aspiration to unearth these ideological motivations in order to be conscious of them, or, if need be, to challenge or resist them.

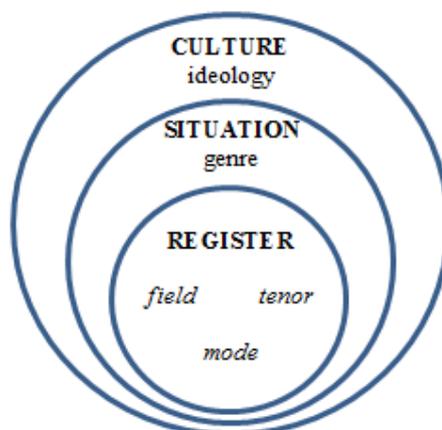


Figure 1: SFG (register), genre and culture

Since its beginning, SFG has been employed in a range of fields and disciplines which employ language or other semiotic systems (for an overview of the approaches see, for example, Eggins 2004) and has proven its theoretical-methodological robustness and analytical vitality.

2 Methodological considerations

The overall objective of the course is that students, along with acquiring and/or enhancing their knowledge of English grammar, develop their ability in using it not only as a tool to critically assess different areas of language use, but also as an instrument which will enable them to effectively reach their own communicative goals. Thus the course's primary ambition is to contribute to the development of an empowered, competent, and critical language user. The methodological environment in which the course has been conceived of and developed has been identified as 'blended learning'. As face-to-face teacher/student interaction remains an essential part of the instruction process, we cannot refer to our approach as pure e-learning. It is therefore essential to point out what it means when a course is designated to be blended. What is blended, anyway, if we contrast it to courses which are not blended?

2.1 Blended learning

There exists a plurality of opinions as to what constitutes the object of blending. For our purposes, we shall understand blended learning to mean a combination of online and face-to-face interaction, a definition proposed, among others by Rooney (2003) or Osguthorpe & Graham (2003). The latter identify six reasons why one might decide to design a blended learning course. These include: (1) pedagogical richness, (2) access to knowledge, (3) social interaction, (4) personal agency, (5) cost-effectiveness, and (6) ease of revision (*ibid*). To these, we may add the benefit of overcoming temporal restrictions, which limit face-to-face learning. Moreover, the time constraint becomes even more evident if large groups are the object of instruction, where there may not be enough time to involve all of the participants in the interaction.

According to Bersin (2004), we can trace the use of technology in instruction as far back as the 1960s, to the very emergence of computer technology. Automated, autonomous and efficient learning has been utilised very early on by, for example, IBM to train employees. Such autonomous learning has been later expanded to use emerging multi-media. Nonetheless,

even with the most modern means, pure e-learning lacks the social dimension of face-to-face interaction. Therefore, blended learning seeks to combine the best of both worlds.

By definition, blended learning mixes approaches. The most obvious is the mixing of environments, whereby learners find themselves in personal classroom interaction as well as in computer-mediated learning interaction, one amending the other. Furthermore, this approach enables the mixing of synchronous and asynchronous learning. The asynchronous nature of computer-mediated learning enables the learners to manage their time as they see fit, return to the study materials and revise if necessary. The role of the teacher is different in these two modes. In the computer-mediated environment, the teacher becomes a mediator whose role it is to guide the students through the material, motivate them and be available for feedback, building on the autonomous nature of study in an electronic environment.

The technological aspect of blended learning presents an issue in itself. Krause (2007) points out that blended learning takes place in an environment with an effective and systematic approach to the use of technology. It may be difficult to avoid the 'wow' effect of new technological breakthroughs and the associated urge to incorporate the same in teaching, but a distinct feature of blended learning is its focus on the selection and utilization of technological aids for particular instruction purposes. Such careful selection and implementation of information technology is more beneficial to the outcome of learning.

As far as the most beneficial aspects of blended learning are concerned, we might mention that blended learning creates an environment which takes into account the diversity of students. Slow learners or students relying on visual memory are given a broader array of means to understanding the topic at hand. Some may find the solitude of the computer screen more relaxing than the classroom environment and vice versa. Students are thus given a choice of means to tackle the issues presented in the education process. With a course structured in accordance with the specific goals, the teacher is able to optimally use both physical and virtual resources at their disposal.

2.2 The structure of the course

The course is designed to be taught in two thirteen-week series of sessions corresponding to two semesters of the linguistic module within a credit study programme. The following is the proposed thematic structure of the first semester of the course (which was actually taught

in the winter semester, 2011/12 academic year): 1. *Language and meaning*, 2. *The Structure of English*, 3. *Units of language structure: Word*, 4. *Units of language structure: Phrase*, 5. *Experiencing Substantiality: Noun Phrase*, 6. *Experiencing substantiality: Noun and noun categories description*, 7. *Experiencing substantiality: Countability*, 8. *Experiencing substantiality: Number*, 9. *Experiencing substantiality: Determination*, 10. *Experiencing substantiality: Case*, 11. *Experiencing substantiality: Gender*, 12. *Experiencing substantiality: Pronouns*, 13. *Experiencing qualitativity, circumstantiality and relationality: Adjective, Adverb and Prepositional Phrases*. The course consists of the lecture and seminar modules which are taught in and the blended-learning format.

2.2.1 The lecture module of the course

The course's lectures are delivered in a traditional classroom with students following the lecturer's commentary of the text projected on the screen. The text is a multi-media modification of a written lecture to which students can get access prior to each lecture. By surveying particular grammatical categories of English noun (viz. *countability*, *number*, *determination*, *case* and *gender*), the topics of lectures cover the entire breadth of English noun morphology which forms the backbone of traditional formal grammatical description. However, the traditional inventory of morphology is presented here within the semiotic perspective, i.e. how in the processes of making-meaning language users experience their world and make sense of it. The four central experiential processes are *substantiality*, *processuality*, *qualitativity*, *circumstantiality* and *relationality* (see Table 3).

| | Chapter | register | genres |
|----|--|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Language and meaning | conversation | a film scene |
| 2 | The structure of English | conversation | a comic strip |
| 3 | Units of language structure: word | a dvertising | printed a dvertisement |
| 4 | Units of language structure: phrase | a dvertising | printed a dvertisement |
| 5 | Experiencing substantiality: the noun phrase | | |
| 6 | Experiencing substantiality: noun and noun categories | expository writing | Wikipedia article |
| 7 | Experiencing substantiality: countability | | |
| 8 | Experiencing substantiality: number | a dvertising | information leaflet |
| 9 | Experiencing substantiality: determination | journalism | newspaper article |
| 10 | Experiencing substantiality: case | journals | news video |
| 11 | Experiencing substantiality: gender | popular culture | music video |
| 12 | Experiencing substantiality: pronouns | a dvertising | video a dvertisement |
| 13 | Experiencing qualitativity, circumstantiality and relationality: adjective, adverb and prepositional phrases | commercial documentation | user's manual |

Table 3: A survey of a SFG morphology course: topics, registers and genres

The present course is designed to focus primarily on experiencing substances and the closely associated qualities and relations (processes are planned to be the focus of a different but complementary course). As far as the choice of discourses and genres is concerned, they have been chosen in such a way that they a) are representative of a wide array of social encounters involving the spoken and written uses of language (e.g. *conversation* and *Wikipedia article*), b) are linked to casual students' experience (e.g., *iPad*, *music video*), c) represent current societal issues and problems (e.g. *technological advancements*, *iPad*), d) linked to particular aspects of language structure (e.g. the notion of substantiality and the *Wikipedia article* containing a high proportion of nouns), and, e) complement each other (*iPad* is covered in three discourses/genres: expository writing, information leaflet, video advertisement and user's manual).

As a rule, lectures follow a single template: a) introduction, in which a sample of discourse from a particular genre is introduced and its choice is justified; a given sample serves as an illustration of the topic of a chapter, b) discussion, when a given area of grammar is thoroughly discussed, and c) register analysis, in which the given sample is analysed on three levels of meaning, i.e. ideational, interpersonal, and textual; each level includes a detailed analysis of transitivity, mood and textual structures.

The main running thread underlying each chapter is the idea that texts are constructed to convey meanings, and it is by unearthing these three layers of meaning and scrutinizing structures involved in their construal that we can arrive at understanding of users' perspectives, which are underlain by ideological systems of values and convictions to which the users adhere.

2.2.2 *The seminar module of the course*

In addition to the multimedia platform of the lectures, the seminar module is designed in such a manner as to involve students in the assignments as much as possible and utilize the time they spend on studying in the most effective way. To accomplish this goal, we set out to design, structure and present the seminar activities according to the principles of blended learning. In the initial phase, this process required us to analyze the load of activities students were supposed to go through to get a deeper understanding of the material taught and to practice it sufficiently.

The assignments are based on the lecture topics and attempt to elaborate on the examples presented in the lectures. The lecture module should present all the necessary information and background knowledge for the students to be able to solve the assignments successfully. The seminar module is a hands-on experience of the phenomena treated from a theoretical point of view in the lectures and requires the students to apply what they have learned in order to analyze discourse themselves.

Traditionally, students were supposed to complete seminar assignments at home and discuss them in class. This approach, combined with the relative novelty of the subject of Morphology resulted in time constraints limit the discussion in face to face classes in order to cover the whole load. This temporal limitation was one of the major issues we hope to solve by means of the presented blended-learning approach. The exercises have been divided into two parts, both available in the electronic learning environment of Moodle, whereby one set of exercises has been redesigned to provide automatic feedback to the students via said learning environment. The students, each of them logged in under their name, complete this set of exercises online and on their own. Upon completion, students are presented not just with a simple statement whether or not their solution was correct. Providing only this type of feedback, even if accompanied with the correct solution, would not be effective in our attempt to devote the limited time for face-to-face interaction to dealing with more difficult issues.

Therefore, the exercises were designed to provide a complex feedback, providing both the correct answer as well as an explanation of why this answer is correct and other answers are not. To accomplish this, we had to use our experience from the past to anticipate errors and treat them as a part of the feedback. In this manner, students do not need to bring up certain issues in class anymore, as these are relatively well covered and explained in the online activities and the feedback they provide.

In addition, the electronic learning environment enables the instructor to check the responses and solutions the students submitted and see whether there had been any unforeseen errors, which may deserve explicit treatment in class. To acquire the same insight in the face to face meetings would not be possible. Having students complete activities under their names in an electronic format makes it also possible to track their active participation throughout the whole course. We refrained from using the answers submitted by students for

grading purposes in order to obtain relevant feedback concerning the design of the course. If the activities were graded, it may push students towards cheating or other dishonest behaviour in solving the exercises.

One significant criterion for choosing which exercises to include in this automated online form was the effort connected with their design and implementation in the electronic form. Certain activities, like sentence structure analysis by means of tree diagrams, are difficult to transfer to the online format. Moreover, this type of exercises generates a lot of topics for class discussion. Therefore, we devised a second set of exercises, which are still available through the electronic learning environment but which do not provide any feedback, as they need to be printed out and their solutions brought to class to be discussed. As mentioned, these activities generally include exercises focusing on discussions and the presentation of original analyses or opinions of the students.

Nonetheless, face to face classes still feature certain room for the discussion of online exercises, especially in our testing phase, to gather feedback in order to improve these exercises further.

Conclusion

It is in the belief of the authors of the course of English morphology that it provides a teaching/learning environment which is innovative, contemporary and challenging. It applies SFG as a powerful tool to the analysis of contemporary language data with a view of disclosing, through the detailed treatment of morpho-syntax of the language, i.e. its 'infrastructure', the underlying forces, systems of values, beliefs and ideologies that have given the data their shape within their respective discourses. By locating much of the teaching/learning activity into a still novel electronic environment, the authors strive to maximize the utility of the course time and increase its overall effectiveness. It remains to be seen whether their ambitions, as well as students' expectations, have been met.

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