

Language Proficiency or Symbolic Capability: A Dialectical Perspective

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Dialectics

Traditional approaches to language proficiency within applied linguistics are based on the dualistic perspective that has been inherited from psychology (Bakhurst, 1991) and that dominates the majority of research in SLA and language education. Common dualisms include competence-performance, implicit-explicit knowledge, acquisition-learning, language learning-language use, teaching-assessment, etc. In many cases research has focused on trying to determine either what the relationship between the members of each pair might be or whether, as in the case of implicit-explicit knowledge and learning-acquisition, or whether one member of the pair is more important for language learning than the other. A dialectical perspective does not necessarily argue that it is wrong to approach research from a dualistic orientation, but instead raises the interesting question of what would happen if for example acquisition-learning, competence-performance, implicit-explicit knowledge were not separate phenomena but were instead necessary components of the same unified process. In other words, instead of asking whether acquisition or learning is more important, a dialectical perspective assumes that both processes form a unity that cannot be separated into component elements without compromising the integrity of the general process we are trying to understand in the first place.

Dialectics assumes an organic and inseparable wholeness to reality. Vygotsky frequently illustrated the concept of dialectics with a discussion of how to explain the property of water that allows it to extinguish fire. To search for the explanation at the level of the elements that comprise water results in a conundrum, because hydrogen burns and oxygen promotes burning. What is required is the unity of oxygen and hydrogen. Analogously, Vygotsky proposed that the human mind is neither exclusively biological nor social but is instead the consequence of the unity that results from the interplay of biologically specified functions (e.g., memory, attention, learning, intention) and socially created, symbolic (primarily linguistic) means to intentionally control these functions.

Sociocultural theory begins from the assumption that the individual-social relationship is a necessary, inseparable and organic given that integrates mind and body into a single unity. Consider the status of an object such as a wooden table. At first glance it may seem to be another physical object in a world comprised of such objects. However,

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the table is not merely a physical object but it has a particular shape, and perhaps color and size imparted to it by the intentional activity of a human being. And above all it serves a particular function or purpose assigned to it by the person who made it (e.g., used for eating, studying, or working). The table is thus simultaneously a natural object and a social object. It has not only physical attributes but it also has human significance.

In many respects, human language is similar to the wooden table. Language is comprised of physical material (acoustic waves, as in the case of spoken language, or visual marks, as in the case of written language). And like a table, language is also simultaneously a social and (according to Vygotsky's theory) psychological phenomenon in that it takes on a particular significance or function as the result of intentional human activity. By being employed in human communicative (or for Vygotsky, cognitive) activity, language not only has physical properties but symbolic properties as well. It has significance by virtue of the use humans put it to. Without such use, language would have no significance. As Bakhurst (1991, p. 186) states, "a symbol plucked from the real process of exchange between social beings and nature, stops being a symbol ... its soul vanishes from its body." Nevertheless, it is precisely this move to divorce language from human activity in order to study it in a pure, sanitized form that has become the prevailing perspective in linguistics.

Dueling with Dualism

Much contemporary work in linguistics has been influenced by the writings of the 17th century British philosopher, John Locke, who posed the following question about the nature of human linguistic communication: how do I as speaker, know that you, as listener, understand exactly what I say to you? Although many scholars attempted to answer Locke's question, it was the Swiss linguistic Ferdinand de Saussure who proposed a response that has had profound consequences for how linguists and consumers of linguistic research, including language teachers, language learners and language testers, think about language. Saussure argued that all speakers of a language understand each other in precisely the same way because meaning resides in language, not in the speaking activity itself. On this view, language is conceptualized as a fixed code whereby speakers communicate with each other through telementation; a process in which A encodes a message in words and transmits these to B via acoustic sound waves or visual light waves, who in turn decodes or converts these into the same semantic representation that A has in mind (Harris, 2003b). In essence, Saussure separated language from speakers and argued that the scientific study of language was possible if we treat language as a physical object, on a par with a lump of wood that exists independently of people. The problem with Saussure's position is that he now had no way of taking account of meaning and therefore had to assume that it resided a priori in language rather than in the activity of people engaged in communication. This was the equivalent of assuming that "tableness" already existed in the lump of wood itself and not in the activity of a carpenter who gave the wood its human shape and significance. In one stroke Saussure had created a dichotomy between humans as symbol-making beings and the very material they used to make those symbols. In other words, Saussure assigned autonomous existence to an artifact that was produced by human activity and in so doing alienated human agents "both from the product of their activity and from their own creative powers" (Bakhurst 1991, p. 193).

To overcome the problems created by Saussure's dichotomization of people and language, Roy Harris and his colleagues have proposed an approach to language analysis known as "integrational linguistics." Among other things, integrational linguistics argues that "human beings do *not* [*italics in original*] live in a communicational world that is neatly and permanently compartmentalized into language and non-language" (Harris 2003b, p. 67). At least two significant claims emerge from this stance. One is the indeterminacy of linguistic signs; that is, signs do not pre-exist in some abstract decontextualized space, just as "tableness" does not exist in the lump of wood, but are in fact constituted in the context of the situation by virtue of the integrational role they fulfill. That is, people create signs, just as carpenters make tables, through intentional and purpose oriented (communicative) activity. The other, perhaps more controversial claim, is that "linguistic communication is a continuum of interaction which can be manifested both verbally and non-verbally" (Harris 2003b, p. 45) to include phenomena either ignored or marginalized in general linguistics. This includes silences, pauses, grunts, tone of voice, facial expressions, eye gaze, touching, gestures, movement of the entire body. According to Harris, a response to the implicit command "Can you please pass the salt?" that consists of a lengthy gaze accompanied by the absence of anything verbal is just as much a linguistic act as is the verbal response "No!" This is because in our daily lives we are not restricted to making significance through exclusively verbal means. Just as carpenters use a variety of tools (e.g., handsaw, hammer, chisel, knife, hand auger, on the one hand, or a power saw, an electric drill, and an air powered nail gun, on the other) to shape the lump of wood, we can use whatever communicative tools are at our disposal to make the meaning we want to make, or can we? And here lies the problem of language proficiency. To address this issue we turn to the work of the integrational linguist Talbot Taylor.

Beyond the Saussurian View of Language Proficiency

According to Taylor in spoken communication, "communicational efficacy" and "grammaticality" are not necessarily the same thing: "It is one thing to speak effectively, another to speak in conformity to the conventions for written language style" (1998b, p. 195). Taylor argues that the most important goal of ordinary conversation is that the participants communicate to their "mutual satisfaction" and as such "the question of grammaticality of utterances produced is irrelevant." To assume that grammaticality is central to conversational communication is to buy into the belief that in ordinary conversation the grammatical standards that apply to formal written language, as is assumed in sentence-based theories of grammar, underlie communicative interaction (Taylor 1998b, p. 194). The scriptist position, based on Saussure's view of language, argues that communication would be next to impossible unless hearers were able to access the supposedly well formed sentences that underlie speakers' often grammatically problematic, discontinuous, and elliptical utterances.

From the integrationist perspective, however, there is no reason to require the hearer "to transform an ungrammatical utterance into grammatical sentence form" in order to understand it (Taylor 1998b, p. 195). As Taylor (1998b) points out, interactants generally do not notice or react to (if they do notice) grammatical incoherencies that occur in conversations. Brown (1980, p. 36) offers three reasons for why this happens: conversations are fabricated as they proceed and therefore a fair amount of planning happens

on-line and in view of the interlocutor who pays attention to this process so has at least a general idea of what the speaker is likely to say; related to the first, conversation deals with social, cognitive and attitudinal meanings and given that this is what an interlocutor listens for, if the meaning is coherent, grammatical form is not relevant either for the hearer or the speaker; conversation is an interactive process and thus the speaker relies on the hearer's inferencing powers, which includes assigning meaning to the non-verbal linguistic signs the speaker is generating. The effectiveness of an utterance is not determined by its appearance but by how interactants co-regulate the communicative process.

According to Taylor (1998b, p. 196) there are "no fixed limits... determining what utterances must be like to be communicative." In light of Harris's expanded notion of what counts as a linguistic sign, it is clear that "speakers and hearers can draw on a potentially limitless range of resources: from gesture to paralinguistics and poetic features and from situational context to assumptions of prior experience" (Taylor 1998b, p. 196). Thus, the communicative efficacy of an utterance is not determined by some abstract grammatical representation; nor is it determined by observers of the interaction but by the interactants themselves.

Taylor presents an effective analogy to illustrate the difference between communicative efficacy and grammatical accuracy. One may engage in a game of tennis with the goal of making a team or with the goal of winning a wager from an opponent. Taylor argues that in the first case it is necessary to do more than defeat an opponent. It is necessary to demonstrate the array of shots one has in one's arsenal as well as to display an ability to adjust to different circumstances. It is not only necessary to show that one can win but that one can play a wide-ranging and consistent game that is adaptable to different types of opponents and to a variety of court surfaces. On the other hand, if no one is watching and a substantial wager is riding on the outcome the only thing that matters is winning. The array of shots and adjustments one can make becomes irrelevant. The only thing that matters is winning the wager. Returning to our table example, a carpenter who wishes to display her or his skills in working with wood, might use traditional hand tools and pay careful attention to detail in creating a table that might even be considered a work of art. This carpenter might well turn out one or two tables in a month. On the other hand, a carpenter interested in making money might decide to produce tables as quickly as possible and therefore opt for power tools and a mass-production approach to carpentry in order to sell as many tables as possible in the same month's time. In both cases, a lump of wood is converted into a significant human object. The objects, however, will in all likelihood look different in their detail, but not in their essential function as tables.

Ordinary conversation is analogous to winning the wager however one can or in making a table that serves human needs. The grammaticality that applies to written language simply does not come into play and so grammatical incoherence is not the primary issue. If communication is achieved to the consensus of both parties involved, the wager is won or the table is built and it would be therefore "artificial and irrelevant to measure my style of play" [in this case, communication] against someone else's notion of the ideal style (Taylor 1998b, p. 194), as occurs in testing situations, where I need to demonstrate to selectors that I can comply with their criteria for playing the communicative game, or making a high-end table.

A Dialectical Perspective on Language Proficiency

Harris (1998b) argues that the concept of *communicative competence* is an attempt to overcome Saussure's segregationist perspective on language and people while at the same time accepting the segregationist stance. It is, he notes, a way of trying to integrate language into communication but it continues to treat "communication as something extra to languages and thus presupposes the very separatism that an integrational approach must deny" (Harris 1998b, p. 44). Successful communication, according to Harris (1998b, p. 38), is contextually determined "in ways that are not analogous to the production of grammatical sentences." In real life, language is not segregated from contexts. It is part and parcel of the context socially as well as psychologically. In real life, "experience is not neatly compartmentalized into the linguistic and the non-linguistic" (Harris 1998b, p. 44). In other words, real life is dialectically organized.

Harris proposes that we drop "competence" from communicative competence because it smacks either of rule-governed or rule-constituted behavior and replace it with "communicative proficiency," which he characterizes as

the ability to cope with the communicational demands and opportunities that situations present us with. What those demands and opportunities turn out to be will depend very much upon the stable cultural components of different civilizations at different times, but also upon the unforeseeable specifics of particular circumstances. Communicative proficiency depends on past experience but there is no reason to believe that what will count as communicative proficiency can be defined in advance of the situations that call for it. And if it cannot be defined in advance, then it cannot be legislated for [or assessed] either by societies or by linguistic theorists. (Harris 1998b, p. 44)

This is indeed a very appealing idea; however, the concept of proficiency within the L2 literature and in particular the testing and assessment literature is affiliated with measurement instruments such as the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview or UCLES. In these measures successful communication is strongly linked with accuracy (syntactic, morphological, lexical, phonological, pragmatic and discursive). In other words, speakers construed as examinees are always playing the game of tennis in front of an audience who demands to see a wide array of shots and playing styles rather than someone who merely wins the match. For this reason we don't think "communicative proficiency" captures the spirit of integrational linguistics given the focus on formal accuracy and native speaker-like behavior associated with the proficiency movement.

Kramersch (2006) also offers an important critique of communicative competence but from a more pedagogically oriented perspective than Harris. She arrives at a similar conclusion, observing that "human communication is more complex than just saying the right word to the right person in the right manner. Most of the time there is not even a right or wrong way of communicating" (p. 251). As an alternative concept, she proposes "symbolic competence," which encompasses not only communicative interaction but also incorporates many of the features argued for in integrational linguistics, including the ability to produce and interpret written texts.

As appealing as Kramersch's proposal is, the fact that she maintains the "competence" component of the original concept, weakens it considerably, because compe-

tence, as Harris claims, continues to support the idea that communication is in some way underwritten by a fixed set of rules and which individuals carry around with them to deploy when they arrive in specific contexts. Moreover, it carries the additional baggage of the competence-performance dichotomy, which leads to assessments intended to infer the abilities in their pure state that underlie performance. On the other hand, Kramsch's use of "symbolic" greatly broadens the notion that social interaction incorporates much more than what is traditionally understood by the term "communicative." It extends to all types of communicative genres whether written or oral and, in our view, at least, entails social as well as psychological functions. Therefore, what is needed is a new term that integrates the intent of Harris's and Kramsch's proposals, but which avoids the problems associated with previous terminology. Although, it may not be fully satisfactory, we tentatively suggest the concept *symbolic capability* to capture the notion that all people as linguistic beings (see Yngve, 1986) are able to learn and manipulate symbols (verbal, non-verbal, textual, contextual, etc.) in order to create and interpret meanings that suit their social and psychological needs. This includes L1 and additional languages and does not establish clear boundaries among these.

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