Linguistics, SLA and Lexicon as the Unit of Language

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Each one of the major linguistic schools takes a different compartment of language as the main building block which shapes the totality of a language. The claim is that most of the linguistic theories have ceded to the prominence of lexicon as one major component of language. Through introducing the concept of lexical features, into the Minimalist Program, Chomsky has acknowledged the fact that lexicon features determine a word's meaning, its morphological shape and its syntactical behavior in syntax. Constructions are based on particular lexical items which have been acknowledged as crucial in SLA although with different labels such as holophrases, prefabricated patterns, formulaic speech, formulae, sequences in SLA, chunks, and formulaic expressions or utterances. By adopting a lexical approach in studying language and language teaching and learning, the need for a new teaching methodology has always been felt, a demand which has never been satisfied.

1. INTRODUCTION

What is the nature of language, and what is learnt when we learn a second language? These are the questions to be answered by the linguistic branch of second language acquisition. The advent of second language acquisition is attributed to the field of Contrastive Analysis (CA). As Nunan (2001) puts it, SLA discipline emerged from 'comparative studies' of similarities and differences between languages. Such studies were carried out based on the idea that a learner's first language (L1) has an influence on the acquisition of the second language (L2), originating contrastive analysis (CA) hypothesis. CA predicts and explains learners' problems based on a comparison between L1 and L2 through determining similarities and differences between them. CA was highly influenced by structuralism as a theory of language and behaviorism as a theory of learning psychology.

2. STRCTURALISM

From a structuralist linguistics perspective, as Saville-Troike (2006) puts it, "the focus of CA is on the surface forms of both L1 and L2 systems and on describing and comparing the language one level at a

time- generally contrasting the phonology of L1 and L2 first, then morphology, then syntax, with the lexicon receiving relatively little attention, and discourse still less" (Saville-Troike, 2006, pp. 34-35). As a structuralist Fries (1945, cited in Saville-Troike, 2006) contends that "in learning a new language, the chief problem is not at first that of learning vocabulary items. It is, first, the mastery of the sound system. It is, second, the mastery of the features of arrangement that constitute the structure of the language" (Fries, 1945, cited in Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 35). Fries (1945, cited in Saville-Troike, 2006) attributes the accuracy to sound system and structures and contends that vocabulary learning results in fluency which hinders a proper control of English.

In structuralism "speech was regarded as the basis of language, and structure was viewed as being at the heart of speaking ability" (Richards & Rodgers 2001, p. 40). However according to them structuralism had two different branches in America and England. "Thus, in contrast to American structuralist views on language, language was viewed as purposeful activity related to goals and situations in the real world" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 40).

According to Kumaravadivelu (2006), the basic tenets of structuralism was criticized mainly by Chomsky who maintained that language is not constituted of hierarchy of structures, but rather a

"network of transformations". He criticized structuralism for its inadequacy in describing characteristics of language and language acquisition such as 'creativity' and 'uniqueness'. With a focus on the deep structures of language structures, Chomsky refuted structuralist's engagement with surface structures, although Chomskyan linguistics is still bound by 'syntactic abstraction' and neglects the importance of meaning and communicative context (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

3.GENERATIVE-TRANSFORMATION GRAMMAR

The systematicity of second language learners' interlanguage with their rules and principles, and rule-governed nature of errors led to the idea of generative linguistics. "Generative linguistics provides careful descriptions of these regularities that are necessary for a complete theory of language acquisition. But they are not sufficient because they do not explain how learners achieve the state of knowledge that can be described in this way" (Ellis, 2003, p. 80).

According to Tsimpli and Dimitrakopoulou (2007), the earlier generative studies according to mainly focused on the availability of Universal Grammar (UG) in second language acquisition, when such studies confirm partial accessibility of UG in SLA, "hypothesizing that while UG constrains L2 development as well as mature L2 grammars, in the domain of parametric options, L1 properties directly or indirectly affect L2 representations even at the advanced state of development" (Tsimpli & Dimitrakopoulou, 2007, p. 216).

According to Norris and Ortega (2003), generative SLA considers language as a 'symbolic system', independent from cognition, and so complex that it cannot be acquired through 'inductive' or 'deductive' learning from input. Because of being rooted in the beliefs of 'first language nativism' the main research focus in generative SLA is investigating whether there is 'indirect','partial','full', or 'no access' to the principles of Universal Grammar (UG) in acquiring a second language, with a main emphasis on language competence rather than performance. They further the point that such an epistemological approach to L2 acquisition deals with constructs which provide explanations and descriptions for the origins of 'linguistic mental representations', and steers clear of interpreting the manner in which such representations are made available to the learner in a determinable way. Norris and Ortega (2003) maintain that generative SLA research limits itself to formal descriptions of transient learner grammars which is manifest in learners' implicit ability in judging L2

forms as ungrammatical, since such research believes that SLA theory is involved in explaining how learners are capable of acquiring a 'full mental representation' of L2 complexities, and what is the reason that they cannot acquire all features of L2 syntax, and also what are the features that learners may be unable to acquire. They conclude that it is likely that generative linguistic studies of SLA only focus on the outcomes of various kinds of grammaticality judgment exercises, in which acquiring means native-like degree of control in rejecting unaccepted exemplars of target grammar (Norris & Ortega, 2003).

According to White (2003), in the generative tradition, it is believed that grammars are mental representations, and that universal principles restrict these representations. She contends that "linguistic universals are as they are because of properties of the human mind, and grammars (hence, languages) are as they are because of these universal principles" (White, 2003, p. 19). White (2003) defines UG as "part of an innate biologically endowed language faculty. It places limitations on grammars, constraining their form (the inventory of possible grammatical categories in the broadest sense, i.e., syntactic, semantic, phonological), as well as how they operate. She contends that UG-based theories of second language acquisition do not claim to account for all aspects of L2 development, rather such theories have a focus on the nature of interlanguage as an unconscious knowledge. She concludes that claims for UG operation in L2 acquisition are that interlanguage grammars occur within a limited scope, and that the "hypothesis space" is determined by UG.

According to Edelman (2007), formalist generative school is in contrast with functionalist approaches in that it is interested in the interpretation of linguistic evidence and its 'proper treatment'. Formalist linguists look for evidence in order to precisely define 'boundaries' and restrictions on certain words and structures in order to discover the properties of such boundaries and constraints. Such a linguistic school is involved in grammaticality judgments by native speakers in regard to the 'well-formedness' of words or structures. Edelman further maintains that through obtaining linguistic data and grammaticality judgments hope to derive the underlying competence, which is considered to be the underlying knowledge if native speakers, and are not interested in performance as a manifestation of that knowledge in practice.

4. THE MINIMALIST PROGRAM

As Edelman (2007) puts it, the minimalist program shares with the formalist linguists the interest in abstract competence level.

"Minimalism seeks to describe the knowledge of language (that is, grammar) using a minimum amount of theoretical machinery. Its name expresses the overarching meta-theoretical principle according to which the derivation distance, as measured by the number of steps needed to link meaning and sound, should be as small as possible. That is, the process that maps thoughts to utterances and vice versa should resort to no representations other than those that are conceptually necessary" (Edelman, 2007, p. 257).

Through introducing the concept of lexical features, into the Minimalist Program, Chomsky has acknowledged the fact that lexicon features determine a word's meaning, its morphological shape and its syntactical behavior in syntax. Chomsky adopts a lexicon-is-prime stance, and improves his former transformational/generative approach, which had a focus on syntax. Features have a role in determining the behaviors of lexical items in regard to Movement and Merging in order to render a grammatical sentence. Minimalism, in summary, ensures that sound and meaning are encoded as simply as possible and lexical items are crucial in this encoding since they are rich sources of syntactic, morphological, and semantic information. Edelman (2007) considers language faculty as composed of features, operations of Move and Merge, as well as the machinery of LF and PF and Syntax. Edelman moves on to claim that within a Minimalist paradigm what distinguishes one language from another is reduced to lexicons and the setting of binary parameters of UG.

"The various components of grammar, the constraints that govern them, the use of features, and even the features themselves are all innate. Minimalism, in particular, has largely attempted to reduce the problem of learning language to learning words: their pronunciation, features, and meaning. Language acquisition is in essence a matter of determining lexical idiosyncrasies" (Edelman, 2007, p. 258).

5. FUNCTIONALISM

According to Towell (2000), what distinguishes UG from a functionalist perspective is not the acceptance or rejection of UG dictated constraints, rather it is the functionalist' dealing with such constraints as a 'second order question'. From a functionalist standpoint the acquisition of meaning and consequentially the L2 is considered as a social phenomenon realized through the use of language in context. Towell (2000) maintains that interaction in context in order to form meanings that the language being learned is capable of expressing is a 'prerequisite' to language learning. Towell claims that when meaning is acquired it is possible to give grammatical forms to the meanings, a process which he calls grammaticalization. According to Halliday (1978, cited in Mattheiessen, McCarthy & Slade, 2002) systemic functional linguistics is a branch of functional linguistics with the distinctive characteristic that it is concerned with 'internal organization' of language in relation to the functions that it has been arranged to fulfill. Mattheiessen, McCarthy and Slade (2002) maintain that the major concern of systemic functional linguistics is to delineate how language is used by people in order to realize their 'social lives' and how the social worlds are achieved through and in language, on the other hand how language structures are arranged in order to accomplish socio-cultural meanings.

6. CONSTRUCTIONISM

According to Ellis (2003), "a construction is a conventional linguistic unit, that is part of the linguistic system, accepted as a convention in the speech community, and entrenched as grammatical knowledge in the speaker's mind" (Ellis, 2003, p. 66). He puts forward the fact that in a construction grammar all linguistic aspects i.e., morphology, syntax, and lexicon are uniformly represented. He maintains that constructions are symbolic by which he means that in addition to determining the utterance's morphological, syntactic, and lexical form, a construction also determines the related semantic, pragmatic, and/or discourse functions as well. Constructions have unique, and idiosynchronic formal or functional properties and must be represented independently to shape a speakers' knowledge of their language. From a constructionism point of view, as Ellis (2003) puts it, frequency of occurrence is effective in independent representation of even 'regular' constructional patterns. "This usage-based perspective implies that the acquisition of grammar is the piecemeal learning of many thousands of constructions and the frequency-biased abstraction of regularities within them" (Ellis, 2003, p. 67), which means that grammar acquisition is realized through discovering regularities (maybe through hypothesis testing) in highly frequent constructions. Lexicon, thus, is considered as a source of crucial knowledge in learning and discovering syntax. As Ellis (2003) states:
"Since the late 1960s, theories of grammar have increasingly put more syntax into the lexicon, and correspondingly less into rules. The result is that lexical specifications now include not only a listing of the particular constructions that the word can

appear in, but also the relative likelihood of their occurrence" (Ellis, 2003, p. 84). Constructions are based on particular lexical items which have been acknowledged as crucial in SLA although with different labels such as holophrases, prefabricated patterns, formulaic speech, formulae, sequences in SLA, chunks, and formulaic expressions or utterances.

"A language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments. To some extent this may reflect the recurrence of similar situations in human affairs; it may illustrate a natural tendency to economy of effort; or it may be motivated in part by the exigencies of real-time conversation" (Sinclair, 1991, cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 68).

7. LEXICAL APPROACH

According to Harmer (2001), the lexical was first proposed by Dave Willis (1990) and was popularized by Michael Lewis (1993, 1997). Harmer contends that lexical approach is based on the idea that "language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks" (Lewis, 1997, cited in Harmer, 2001, p. 91). According to Harmer lexical phrases include collocations, idioms, fixed and semi-fixed phrases, and he asserts that according to Lewis fluency result from a large store of fixed and semi-fixed prefabricated items, present in the foundation for any linguistic novelty or creativity. Rather than a focus on structures and syntax, lexical approach is involved in teaching phrases.

"A lexical approach would steer us away from an over-concentration on syntax and tense usage (with vocabulary slotted into these grammar patterns) towards the teaching of phrases which show words in combination, and which are generative in a different way from traditional grammar substitution tables" (Harmer, 2001, p. 92).

All these arguments can be boiled down to the prominence of a lexical approach in language acquisition through emphasizing the role of formulaic expressions as efficient fragmentations of language. Lexical approach takes lexical units as basic components of language. Lexical units within this approach are considered as finite, which can be learnt in order to master a language:

"Whereas Chomsky's influential theory of language emphasized the capacity of speakers to create and interpret sentences that are unique and have never been produced or heard previously, in contrast, the lexical view holds that only a minority of spoken sentences are entirely novel creations and that multiword units functioning as chunks or memorized patterns form a high portion of the fluent stretches of speech heard in everyday conversation" (Pawley & Syder, 1983, cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 133).

Such prefabricated units in each language alleviate the burden of understanding everything produced in an utterance, and makes the prediction and guessing of the incoming input easier.

"Once the importance of prefabricated language is acknowledged, the traditional grammar/vocabulary distinction becomes problematic: as the studies show, native speakers are prone to using much of the same language over and over again rather than starting from scratch each time they speak/write" (Harwood, 2002).

There are some criticisms over lexical approach, mostly in regard to its ambiguity in defining lexical units and their incorporation within a sound syllabus. According to Harmer (2001), the criticism over lexical approach is that no one has yet proposed a way to incorporate fixed and semi-fixed phrases into understanding of a language system. Another criticism is that there is the danger of neglecting the language system, as a prerequisite to string phrases into a coherent whole, which may result in learning an endless succession of phrase-book utterances, or according to Thornbury (1998), all chunks but no pineapple. The final criticism is the way in which phrases for teaching and learning are ordered. There is no learning theory adopted in lexical approach and this point has been referred to by Thornbury (1998) who contends that Lewis sympathizes with Krashen's idea about comprehensible input, with a focus on acquisition rather than learning. However, Lewis emphasizes conscious awareness about chunks which results in consciousness-raising.

8. CONTRASTIVE LEXICAL APPROACH AS A OEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

Harmer (2001) claims that although lexical approach has promoted our understanding about the composition of language, it has neglected the necessity for generating a set of 'pedagogic principles' or 'syllabus specifications' in order to construct a new method. The claim is that through revisiting the tenets of Contrastive analysis as the theory of learning and as the historical basis of second language acquisition, and merging it with a lexical approach as the theory of language, a new teaching approach and method can be generated

which satisfies criticisms set forth against Contrastive Analysis, Lexical Approach, and even criticisms against language teaching methodologies by postmethodologists.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), some ideas have been put forward like employing corpus and concordance programs which helps learners master collocations, undertaking Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis, and finally a contrastive lexical approach between L1 and L2. The last perspective is the major pedagogical implication of the arguments made so far. Contrastive Lexical Method (CLM) can be introduced as a new teaching method which is involved in comparing and finding equivalents for set phrases between languages and the way such set phrases can be employed in order to serve certain functions. Bahs (1993) has already proposed a translational equivalence of collocations, but he has abandoned his attempts by reducing contrastive approach collocations to simply finding items with no translation equivalents between languages.

With regard to Contrastive Studies, it can be claimed that the main focus has been on dealing with *what* of language teaching rather than on *how* of language teaching. CLM obviates criticisms set against Contrastive Analysis. Contrary to other forms of contrastive studies CLM is a methodology in language teaching and employs contrasts between L1 and L2 as a learning strategy, and does not involve itself with issues (proposed by Fisiak, 1981) like transfer, interference, prediction of errors, and hierarchy of difficulty, albeit it can take advantage of insights provided by CA studies, because after all CLM necessitates comparison. In contrast with CA, CLM has a pragmatic aim in its contrasting exercises and helps learners gain communicative competence, and still better communicative performance through gaining insight into proper use of language by taking advantage of their L1, already learned, pragmatic knowledge.

9. FINAL REMARKS
All major linguistic schools have acknowledged and ceded to the prominence of lexicon as major components of language, especially when their principles are discussed within a second language learning paradigm. By adopting a lexical approach in studying language and language teaching and learning, the need for a new teaching methodology has always been felt, a demand which has never been satisfied. Contrastive analysts also have been concerned with the criticism that theoretical products of CA should not be used raw in the classroom and must be subjected to pedagogical intervention.

Contrastive Lexical Method (CLM) satisfies the urgent request for the proper methodology always demanded from both CA and Lexical Approach vanguards.

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