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Peer Perspectives on Systemization

A book review of Wilfried Decoo's
Systemization in Foreign Language Teaching

Edited by
Mathea Simons and Jozef Colpaert

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Teaching

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Foreign-language syllabus design and the Common European Framework for Languages in revolutionary times: 1971-2001

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1 Introduction

One year before his official retirement as Professor of French didactics at the University of Antwerpen, Wilfried Decoo crowned his impressive oeuvre with an comprehensive book, entitled *Systemization in Foreign Language Teaching*. The book's value in the field of foreign-language education cannot be overestimated. For all those working in curriculum design, course-content analysis and syllabus construction, it provides essential background information on how to come to grips with integrating elements from widely different dimensions and on state-of-the-art database management. Designing a foreign-language (FL) curriculum and building a FL syllabus is a dauntingly complex matter because of the seemingly limitless ways in which humans use language to express themselves and communicate with others. And yet, although there is no one-to-one correspondence between meaning and form in language, there are form-meaning mappings that can be identified probabilistically and, subsequently, categorized, structured and sequenced in course and testing materials, as Decoo convincingly demonstrates. The following features of *Systemization in Foreign Language Teaching* are worth mentioning. For practitioners, the book provides detailed guidelines for codifying and structuring content (chapters 6-9) and gives an overview of the bewildering heterogeneous landscape of vocabulary discrepancies in the literature on vocabulary content (chapter 5). For both practitioners and generalists in language education, it provides the historic background of content systemization (chapter 3), necessary for

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a proper understanding of the topic. This chapter fills a gap in the literature because there is hardly any comprehensive historic documentation of content systemization of the last 100 years. And finally, the book gives a thorough account of the Council of Europe's work on language curriculum development, over the last forty years, and the many confusions that arose with respect to the functional-notional approach and the need for systemization in content (chapter 4).

2 The cognitive revolution: excitement and confusion

In this contribution, I would like to present some remarks in the margin of chapter 4, colored by personal experiences and views. Chapter 4 provides a historical picture of the rise of the Council of Europe's enterprise to arrive at an European Unit Credit System for Modern Language Learning by Adults, starting with the Rüsclikon Congress in 1971, reaching a first peak with the publication of the Threshold Level (Van Ek, 1975), and culminating in the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in its final version in 2001 (Council of Europe, 2001). In this period of thirty years, several fundamental changes took place in linguistics and psychology, leaving their marks in the work of pioneers such as Van Ek and Trim. Personally, I have experienced this period as a time of both excitement and confusion. Around the year 1970, when I was an undergraduate student in linguistics, my professors taught me and my fellow students the principles of various kinds of structuralism in Europe (De Saussure, Trubetzkoy, Hjelmslev) and in North America (Sapir, Bloomfield, Hockett). In terms of epistemology, structuralism marked a positivist, bottom-up approach to attain reliable and valid knowledge about the world. But around the same time, some younger professors informed us about generative linguistics, offering a radically different view, not only on language and linguistics, but also on the philosophy of science. Chomsky's rationalistic, top-down approach to fundamental issues in the understanding of language turned epistemology completely upside down. Only several years later, I became aware of the fact that Chomsky was part of what is now called the Cognitive Revolution in psychology (Miller, Galanter & Pribram, 1960; Miller & Chomsky, 1963), marking the transition from behaviourist psychology to cognitive psychology. This revolution should be seen as what the philosopher Kuhn (1962) called a paradigm shift, meaning that the rules of the game called scientific inquiry were altered. Arguably, a game change is much more fundamental than a replacement of one theory by another within the same paradigm.

The same period was also marked by strong progress in computer technology, both in terms of hardware and software. Linguists began to create databases of spoken and written language and tools became available for the analysis of large amounts of data, using probabilistic algorithms rather than discrete categories. Whereas, in the 70s and 80s, many linguists expressed scepticism with respect to the possibility of computers being able to correctly translate text from one language into another, the sheer limitless computational power of modern software made it possible to reduce error percentages in translations substantially by the brute force of probabilistic computation. This raised an awareness among cognitive scientists in general and linguists in particular that the human mind forms fuzzy, prototypical categories rather than discrete categories. What a change from structuralism and behaviorism! Preoccupation with definitional issues in constituent analysis and focus on categorizing and cataloguing linguistic phenomena, formed an obstacle for the structuralist school in linguistics to address the more fundamental issues of the field. Such issues concerned, for instance, the relation between form and function (Croft, 1995; Newmeyer, 1998), universals in language and the evolution of language (e.g., Evans & Levinson, 2009), the learnability of language (Chomsky, 1965), and language as a human faculty (e.g., Pinker & Jackendoff, 2005). In contrast to structuralism and behaviorism, it seemed, that connectionist inroads into the human mind and the representation and processing of linguistic information in it, opened new landscapes to discover (Elman et al., 1996).

3 The communicative approach in foreign-language teaching: again excitement and confusion

Not only did the 70s and early 80s mark my academic development, from undergraduate student to PhD candidate, in the same period I also became a second-language (L2) instructor and curriculum designer. For more than twenty years, I taught Dutch as an L2 to adult non-native speakers from all over the world. The first materials I had to teach with, formed a typical example of the audiolingual method (*Levend Nederlands*, preliminary version, 1971), used in what was then called a language laboratory. Under the influence of transformational grammar, I provided my students with grammar rules, which was of course at variance with the audiolingual principles. As soon as we saw commercially viable opportunities, my colleagues and I started to develop new teaching materials, based on the

communicative approach (*Code Nederlands*, 1990). We struggled to come to grips with the various Dutch versions of the Threshold Level (Wijnants, 1985; Coumou et.al., 1987), trying to integrate both a notional-functional and a grammatical-lexical dimension in the selection and sequencing of course content. In this syllabus-development project, as well as in later projects, I learned that many design problems could only be solved on the basis of common sense among the members of the author team. We had extended experience as L2 instructors and we were, albeit sometimes only after heated debates, united by two principles. First, that our adult L2 learners were mainly concerned with language as a system of *forms*, i.e., a system of lexical items and grammatical forms with which they could express certain meanings in certain communicative situations. Second, that course content ought to be sequenced, not only lexically but also grammatically, notwithstanding the rebellious visions that we encountered in the literature (e.g., Newmark & Reibel, 1968; Reibel, 1969). As Decoo recalls it in chapter 4, it was not only generative linguistics which was new in those days. We were also confronted with the notion of speech acts, proposed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), while Hymes (1972) introduced the construct of communicative competence. These new insights in the nature of language and verbal communication were the major stepping stones for the notional-functional syllabus in foreign-language instruction (Wilkins, 1976) and it appears to me that, in the 70ies, the two founding fathers of the European Unit Credit System, John Trim and Jan Van Ek were also heavily affected by these new insights, in their attempt to identify a cross-language "common core" of language use (Decoo, 2011, p. 69). However, the enthusiastic L2 instructors and content developers we were, were left without proper guidance in how to combine a notional-functional approach with the traditional lexical-grammatical approach. As Decoo (2011, p. 79) observes, "Ironically the speech act theory provided the rhetoric to dismiss careful selection and sequencing of content. The new perspective was often presented as a simplistic dichotomy, as if functional were the opposite of grammatical, and notional the opposite of lexical."

Then, in 1980, a new journal, *Applied Linguistics*, was launched, sponsored by both the British and the American Association for Applied Linguistics. The first article in the first issue of this journal was authored by two scholars based in Canada, Michael Canale and Merrill Swain. Their paper, entitled *Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing*, provided us with a theoretical stance on the constructs of (communicative) competence and performance while offering much needed advice in our practical work as syllabus-content constructors. The importance of the following authoritative lines for us, syllabus

developers in the 80ies, cannot be overestimated: "But it seems quite reasonable, in our opinion, to hold off on explicit emphasis on sociocultural aspects of language use at the early stages of second language study in general programmes. Instead, one might begin with a combination of emphasis on grammatical accuracy and meaningful communication, where such communication is generally organized according to the basic communication needs of the learner and the communicative functions and social contexts that require the least knowledge of idiosyncratic appropriateness conditions in the second language" (Canale & Swain, 1980, 15). The authors claimed that communicative competence consists of three components: grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competence. This claim was taken over by the authors of the CEFR: Chapter 5 of the CEFR contains 13 scales for the linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences (Council of Europe, 2001, p.110-129).

4 The quest for "a common core"

I have always been fascinated by the quest of John Trim and Jan Van Ek to identify a "common core" of language use, better known as the Threshold Level. I imagined myself Trim and Van Ek, both of whom had been trained in the era of structuralism with its botanical bottom-up approach to classifying phenomena, as trying to show both to themselves and to the world that there is indeed a common core of language use and that it can be characterized in two ways. First in terms of what the CEFR calls "language activities" in which language users engage with respect to context of language use, communication themes, and communicative tasks and purposes (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 44-56); and second in terms of the three types of "communicative language competences", proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 110-129). I suppose that Van Ek and Trim must have felt a great deal of satisfaction when the Threshold Level was defined in this way and I assume that they must have suffered badly from some of the rather acrimonious attacks on it. But this was the feat of two scholars who produced *not* a falsifiable theory of language use but rather a series of documents that aimed at serving modern-language education in Europe. To solve educational (and hence political) issues in Europe, *practical* solutions had to be proposed, which necessitated a great deal of theoretical and educational compromising, and that is what Trim and Van Ek did in great sincerity. For this reason alone, they deserve our lasting respect.

As an educational professional, involved in curriculum planning and in launching plans for the Dutch as a Second Language State Exams, I have always found the Threshold Level and the CEFR highly useful (Hulstijn, 1991; Hulstijn & Liemberg, 1996; Liemberg & Hulstijn, 1996, 1997). As a scholar, however, I felt increasingly unhappy with its theoretical underpinnings and its lack of empirical support (Hulstijn, 2007, 2010, 2011; Hulstijn, Schoonen, De Jong, Steinel, & Florijn, forthcoming).

Theoretically, one of the most problematic features of the CEFR pertains to its notion of “level” of language proficiency. The CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) fails to make it sufficiently explicit that the six proficiency levels are associated to people’s level of education and intellectual skills, as I argue in Hulstijn (2011). The three higher CEFR levels (B2, C1 and C2) will generally not be attainable by L2 users with educational backgrounds other than higher education. In other words, the CEFR fails to consistently distinguish between L2 development and L2 proficiency. In current theories of language, language acquisition or language use, there are no scientific grounds on which to base the idea of “levels” of language proficiency. In a similar vein, although one can speak of people differing in age, intelligence, socio-economic status, working memory capacity, language-learning aptitude, language-learning motivation and so on, there are no theories of “levels” of age, “levels” of intelligence, “levels” of socio-economic status, etc. Some theories of L2 acquisition do indeed distinguish between various stages of L2 acquisition (stages of development), e.g., Pienemann’s Processability Theory (Pienemann, 2005) or the acquisitional stages defined in the Basic Variety Theory of Klein and Perdue (1997). The CEFR document, however, does not refer to stages of acquisition and it thus does not make explicit reference to any potential link between stages of L2 acquisition and levels of L2 proficiency. Yet, according to the authors of the CEFR, acquiring an L2 is a matter of development along a horizontal dimension of language activities and language competences and a vertical dimension of levels (Council of Europe 2001, 16-17). *This statement, however, should be seen as a matter of faith rather than of substance.* The CEFR’s definitions of six levels of language proficiency, although empirically supported (North & Schneider, 1998), is based solely on the collective insights and judgments of language experts, *not* on a theory of language use, a theory of language acquisition, or a theory that aims to explain why people differ in language proficiency. I hasten to emphasize that this implies no critique of the CEFR. What else could the CEFR authors have done than collect the insights of language experts and extract commonalities from them? Language experts, however, are literate people who have been raised and educated in the norms of a language that has been codified as a standard language, a

process of codification often spanning several centuries. As Decoo (2011, p. 54) notes in connection to the grammar-translation method, "One should remember that for several centuries grammar and style had been a primary study topic in the curriculum of the "better" schools." Generally, the kind of language that is currently being taught in foreign-language education around the world, is the language of literate societies, codified in dictionaries and prescriptive grammars. There is nothing wrong in trying to delineate six levels of command, for educational purposes, using the dictionaries and grammars of these languages and using databases of language spoken and written by educated people. This is generally perceived as serving the needs of all, or most stakeholders, governments, employers and language-learning citizens alike. From a theoretical point of view, however, the levels thus defined can only be regarded as arbitrary, useful for society, but impossible to support or falsify empirically. Thus, the "common core" that Van Ek and Trim sought to capture, along with the levels later defined above and below it, were bound to reflect educational targets, the mental products of a clever play with many variables; but the six levels could impossibly be regarded as falsifiable hypotheses about phenomena of language use or language acquisition.

5 Threats and challenges to the Common European Framework

As Decoo (2011, chapter 4) rightly points out, the Council of Europe's project is affected by some paradoxical trends, which is perhaps inevitable for a project that aims to serve a wide diversity of stakeholders in currently over forty countries (800 million inhabitants), ranging from politicians, via professionals in language education, to individual language teachers and learners.

Currently, the CEFR appears to be exposed to the following threats and challenges. First, the strength of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), namely its potentially unifying generality across languages, is at the same time its weakness. As Decoo (2011, p. 76) observes: "The Achilles heel [of the Threshold Level – JH] is that users still have to do all the work. This task proved intricate when taking into account the didactic process." In various countries and language communities, the need was felt to develop so called Reference Level Descriptions (RLDs), specifying, on the basis of the experience of curriculum designers, teachers and language testers, the precise content of each CEFR level for some individual languages (URL:

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/dnr_EN.asp). It appears, however, that views on the linguistic contents of what should constitute, for example, the B1 level of language proficiency is going to differ substantially between languages, with levels of productive lexical knowledge ranging between 1,500 and 7,000, as is illustrated in Decoo (2011, p. 95). One wonders, however, whether this centrifugal movement is what the Council of Europe had in mind when it instigated the construction of RLDs. As Decoo (2011, p. 84) points out: "However, the more we detail those needs and concretize the specifications for all participants, the further away we move from an open framework. In that sense, the CEF fosters ambiguity."

The second threat and challenge to the CEFR is that every language-assessment company is free to claim that its system of examinations assesses candidates' knowledge of a language at the A2, B1, B2 and following levels of the CEFR, without independent control. In a competitive market, especially with respect to world languages like English and Spanish, it is not unlikely that companies will tend to lower their criteria for command of a certain CEFR level, so that, for instance, a B1 certificate in English will be less difficult to obtain from their company than from another one. The general public may continue to believe, however, that "a B1 is a B1", with reference to the 2001 CEFR document.

Thus, there appears to be a major problem with respect to the definitions of the CEFR levels, both in language-neutral and in language-specific ways. The problem is how to establish and maintain authoritative definitions and norms, respected by all stakeholders in all countries, in their very own interest. Decoo (2011, p. 100) proposes a realistic and feasible way to move from where we are now: "The development of RLDs since 2002 is supposed to provide users with the "descriptions" of language content appropriate for each level (...), which would be comparable in size and range across languages. A critical analysis reveals that the figures differ spectacularly from one language to another. Moreover, these new inventories seem to simply resurrect Threshold inventories of years before, with only some limited adjustments. It seems we have come full circle with such RLDs duplicating the work on content systemization of earlier years. In that case we are back at square one: What to do with a systemized inventory such as *Profile Deutsch* or *Plan curricular*? It should function like a prospective syllabus as the basis for learning materials. "

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