

Applying Cognitive Linguistics to Second Language Learning and Teaching

Jeannette Littlemore.

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Two crucial issues for LSP practitioners are the relevance of linguistic theories to Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Second Language Teaching (SLT) and Second Language Learning (SLL), and if relevant, how they can get into the classroom. Jeannette Littlemore's book addresses both with respect to Cognitive Linguistics (CL). Her introductory chapter gives a telegraphic outline of key claims while at the same time providing an excellent road map of the ensuing book. Major issues to crop up are the priority of meaning for CL, the continuum between syntax and semantics, categorisation on prototypical principles and usage as lode star – all raising very interesting SLT considerations. For instance, what is taken for granted in mother tongue usage may readily be questioned, brought to the surface, even considered arbitrary in SLL.

Chapter 2 tackles the issue of construal and how it can contribute to SLT. Roughly, construal is how speakers focus and present or express their conceptualisation of phenomena. Here issues of choice, pressure towards certain usage and conventionalisation arise and their relevance for SLT. The chapter deals with central CL pillars such as attention, salience, perspective, constitution and categorisation (particularly the latter), showing how these factors mould and modulate expression. The author convincingly shows how different languages diverge because of these factors, how they become stumbling blocks for SLL and how conscious awareness of or attention to them can facilitate learning and dispel that feeling of arbitrariness which besets learners when the cognitive structures and expression of their first language (L1) jar with those of a target language. Categorisation may sound abstract and remote from the language classroom but when we utter certain Spanish idioms – *No le pidas peras al olmo, ¿Qué tiene que ver el tocino con la velocidad?* – what is highlighted is the commonplace importance of categorization and the fiasco resulting from its failure.

Chapter 3 takes the categorization issue into a finer-grained level of analysis

showing how it can neatly illustrate lexical, morphological, phonological and intonational questions. At these levels, the cornerstone and highly productive CL concept of “radial categories” is shown to have particular explanatory value. As the author states (referring to Read, 1993): “[k]nowledge of the different senses that a word can have is an important measure of vocabulary depth” (page 41) and the concept of “radial categories” with its structuring of polysemy from a central to more peripheral meanings is an effective way to focus this thorny issue for SLL. The author points out how the non-native speaker is rather remiss about using figurative extensions in a second language (L2), suggesting “learned attention” as a beneficial counter strategy. Moreover, the essential CL concept of “radial category”, which holds that categories have central or better examples and peripheral or more elusive ones, is according to the author applicable across the language board, being equally rewarding when applied to grammar, phonology and intonation and she then goes into the ensuing benefits for SLT and SLL.

Chapter 4 deals with another tricky issue for SLA, namely, encyclopaedic knowledge: since students easily tend towards one-to-one mother tongue equivalences, they often miss the rich connotational meaning of most lexis. The author’s point is that this is not an area of sheer disconnection since structure clearly emerges from frames and networks. The trade off from this approach is how it enables learners to approximate to a more native type of grasp and feel for language use and a greater penetration into L2 culture scripts, though increasing NNS to NNS scenarios relativise the latter’s importance.

Chapter 5 tackles another SLA stumbling block, metaphor. Even advanced learners have been shown to practice avoidance strategies towards the use of metaphor in L2, highlighting that this is a particularly difficult area for them. Added to this would be learner’s not noticing metaphor or tending to break up metaphorical phraseological units mechanically as if these were literal strings.¹ While pointing out the need for refinements and improvements in the different approaches to metaphor within CL, the author indicates how the overall conception allows for a view which is more structured and pattern evidencing.

While metonymy (Chapter 6) may be a universal language feature, how different languages make use of it may differ widely. The author gives convincing evidence for both discourse community specificity and language specificity in the use of this conceptual device. Furthermore, as well as its

characteristic referential function, she shows metonymy to be multifunctional: it may be strongly evaluative, trigger euphemistic language usage, create humour or play an important role in pragmatic inferencing. For SLA, the author favours explicit attention to the device exploiting similarities and differences in L1 and L2 usages. A fundamental issue with both metaphor and metonymy, as I see it, is that both are communication facilitating devices in language usage and if there is a breakdown in L2 learner comprehension, the effect is all the more devastating, since an intended asset becomes an outright liability.

The increasing importance assigned to the role of gesture in language usage (chapter 7) is related to “embodiment” which holds that “our view of ‘reality’ is constrained to a large extent by the nature of our bodies and the way we use them to perceive our environment” (page 127). The assets for SLA accruing from the more or less universal nature of the interaction of the human body with the world and how this bears on grammar is considered while, at the same time, it is contrasted with the now equally growing body of evidence of cross linguistic variation in the use of gesture. Given the close synchrony between speech and gesture, awareness of how different languages specifically use the latter is an affordance in approximating towards native-like fluency.

Motivation (chapter 8) is another pillar of CL where it has a specific meaning, namely, that as well as arbitrariness, there are a lot of words, word combinations, expressions and language use which are motivated and where reasons and logic can be given for their deployment. This factor can be seen as a net advantage for SLA where the learner can be shown and can see, pattern, reason, logic and not just sheer arbitrariness. Building on earlier work, Littlemore shows the comprehension and retention advantages of such processes as figure and ground, alliteration, iconicity, polysemy, synaesthesia and grammaticalization.

Chapter 9 brings aboard one of the latest developments in CL, Construction Grammar (CG). This approach favours the “idiom principle” or the phraseological over focus on the individual word or traditional grammar. The purported advantage, in line generally with CG claims, is to give an analysis more in keeping with the reality of language usage and the meanings which underlie and drive that usage. With due reservation, CG could outline productive patterns and mitigate the sense of arbitrariness that easily overwhelms SLL. Finally, chapter 10 pulls together the ideas put

forward throughout the book and gives a fitting overview plus future predictions.

Overall, the book is highly recommendable. It offers two for the price of one: as well as successfully applying CL to SLA, at the same time it manages to make many of the theoretical concepts of CL crystal clear. The style and expression are limpid and lively; the exemplifications are insightful, telling and convincing - often with a pinch of humour to boot. On the other hand, while the author shows the advantages of CL for SLA, she presents them critically, counterbalancing them with qualifications and relevant limitations and the perennial warning as to the probability of different languages operating differently yet explicity from a CL perspective.

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REFERENCES

Read, J. (1993). "Development of a new measure of L2 vocabulary knowledge". *Language Testing* 10: 355-371.

NOTES

¹ I often mention my own initial confrontation with *Qué tiene que ver el tocino con la velocidad* – I concluded that the speed could refer to how quickly a person stepping on fat bacon hit the ground!