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Grammar and Formulaicity in Foreign Language Teaching

ABSTRACT. There are three general problem areas in the production of native-like language by the foreign learner: lexically based co-occurrence restrictions, inflectional paradigms and function words with little semantic impact. Remedial action can either be rule-based or dictionary-based. This corresponds to two traditionally recognized modes of sentence processing: analytic (with conscious reference to the grammatical system) or holistic (formulaic, where whole chunks are attended to). I argue for the existence of a third, middle-of-the-road strategy, which I tentatively label the "contentive" mode of sentence processing, with the focus on content-bearing individual lexical items.. Contentive processing is a key factor in the modular concept of formulaicity, proposed in this paper. A formula can be thought of as a bundle of opaque features, a recurrent unit, a social token or a morphosyntactic exemplar. This puts a different perspective on language teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a perfect world foreign language learning would be just as easy and effective as first language acquisition. We do not live in a perfect world, however, and the striking differences between L1 and L2 attainment demand a closer scrutiny. One possible answer that has repeatedly been offered for the observed L1/L2 performance discrepancies is that L1 acquisition is guided by specialise 6d genetic mechanisms, while foreign language learners have restricted access or, possibly, no access to the structural blueprint. The 'pre-wired' information, available to every child, is often referred to as Universal Grammar (UG). Functional alternatives to UG-based accounts stress general cognitive abilities as the driving force behind acquisition and a rapid resolution to the conflict is unlikely as the two approaches seem to share no common grounds due to the incompatibility of the key assumptions. A problem with a non-UG account of acquisition is its cavalier and haphazard treatment of syntactic phenomena. UG-driven models, on

the other hand, swing the pendulum in the opposite direction, by relying on explicit and complex interacting rule systems. Fortunately, a third option has recently arisen, a likely candidate for the middle-of-the-road position between the generative and functional camps, developed by O'Grady in a series of important papers.

This involves reducing syntactic categories to a semantic base (O'Grady 2005: 46) and denying them any specific autonomous status. General nativism also proposes to unify the theory of sentence structure with the theory of sentence processing.

I would like to apply some of the major assumptions of general nativism to the analysis of the processes underlying foreign language use. Specifically, it is my intention to demonstrate that foreign language processing centres predominantly on the semantic bases O'Grady refers to, with subsequent weakening of the combinatorial mechanisms and notorious underrepresentation of syntactic categorization in interlanguage development. This diagnosis and the remedial action that it calls for both lead to the rethinking of the concept of formulaicity in language pedagogy.

II. THE THREE PROBLEM AREAS

For the purposes of this paper let me define three general problem areas in the production of well-formed (=grammatical) language by the foreign learner:

1) a. lexically based (non-generalizable) co-occurrence restrictions;
   b. word order and inflectional markers;
   c. function words with little or no semantic content.

Category (1a) subsumes various collocational types (e.g. adjective – noun or verb – noun partnerships) as well as recognition of homonymy and, to a lesser extent, polysemy in open choice sequences, which remain opaque for the language learner. To consider a simple example, the fact that in German one can talk about introducing people and imagining things using the same verb (*vorstellen*) and that the word for a theatre performance (*vorstellung*) also derives from the same verb will be an unpredictable property of German lexicon, a non-generalizable case of homonymy for a present-day English-speaking student of L2 German. For the Polish learner, on the other hand, the accidental array of patterns exhibited by *vorstellen* and its derivatives may (and, therefore, should) be shown to match the lexical properties and co-occurrence requirements of the word *przedstawiać*:

2) to introduce a guest / einen Gast vorstellen / przedstawiać gościa;

3) to imagine / sich vorstellen / przedstawiać sobie (archaic and prescriptively incorrect but fully recognizable);

4) theatre performance / Vorstellung / przedstawienie.

On the other hand, the distinct uses of *empfangen* will be matched by the English uses of *receive*, whereas they will have to be learnt as separate items by the Polish learner, as there is no single Polish lexical item subsuming the three basic uses of *empfangen / receive*.

The second large problem area is that of word order and inflectional markers (cf. 1b above). The fact that inflection is a major obstacle on the way to accuracy even in inflectionally poor languages such as English will be testified by generations of foreign language learners who struggle to remember the third person *-s* on present tense verb-forms. Inflections do not only pose a problem because of their complexity (some inflectional patterns are straightforward and fairly regular) but primarily because of their meagre impact on the informative value of the message. Inflection acts as a binding agent in chemistry or fast-setting cement in architecture. Its major function is to glue together meaningful elements. In a language that has inflection, inflectional markers will be a well-formedness condition, *a sine qua non* for the existence of a sentence. But just as a trained chemist can tell what the likely outcome of a reaction can be, given the range and volume of input substances (reagents), so a linguistically and pragmatically competent user can often tell what meaning has been intended by his interlocutor, even in the absence of the inflectional skeleton marking the thematic functions of meaning-bearing elements within any sentence. This kind of inflection, whose function is to indicate grammatical relations with no or little consequence for the semantics of the message, will be referred to here as *uninterpretable features* in the sense of Chomsky (1995: 276-280).

To illustrate, consider a plausible analysis of the mechanisms that generate sentence (5) below, representative of one notorious error pattern to be found in the data gathered for this paper.[1]

5) The workers can arrived to the Paris.

There is a sequence of words that carry the meaning of sentence (5): *workers - can - arrived - Paris*. Interpretable features must match. For example, one of the complement features of *can*, the requirement that it be followed by the main verb is matched by the head feature of *arrive*, categorising it as a main verb. The learner is able to attend to the matching process consciously or apply the matching requirements subconsciously after sufficient proceduralisation.

The mismatch affects the uninterpretable features: the complement feature of *can* requiring the verb that follows it to be infinitival does not mirror

[1] Unless otherwise stated, the empirical data come from a short writing task taken by 125 candidates to the English language teaching college in Siedlce in the year 2001. Overall, they fall well below the expected B2 standard (Common European Framework). I am grateful to Agnieszka Wróbel for help with transcribing the data.

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the head specification of *arrived*, which is marked as [+past tense] or [+past participle].

In the L2 uninterpretable features are acquired late. In L1A (=L1 acquisition) the development of uninterpretable features is assisted by universal mechanisms. Due to the unavailability of such mechanisms in foreign language learning,[2] awareness of uninterpretable features will take longer to develop and will prematurely fossilize.

The fact that [+infinitive] is the complement feature of *can* will derive from a more general pedagogical rule specifying the well-formedness conditions on the *modal + main verb* sequence. Before the learner becomes familiar with this rule *can arrived* will remain grammatical with respect to his or her interlanguage norms. The activated cognitive script *workers – can – arrive – Paris* does not depend on the presence of functional elements (e.g. inflectional morphemes).

The third problem area alluded to in (1c) above is function words with negligible semantic impact. The mechanisms involved are exactly the same as for uninterpretable inflection. The reasons for keeping them apart are twofold. In the first place, they reflect two distinct levels of sentence analysis (morphology vs. syntax), in the second place, an element with word status (e.g. a preposition) is likely to undergo transfer, while inflectional endings, while transferable in principle, tend to be randomly left in or out.

One of the reasons why English is a fairly easy language to teach for basic communicative purposes may well be the relative absence of inflection, which results in grammatical functions systematically being associated with specific sentence positions. Function words, however, cannot be easily eliminated. Consider the use of *to* and *by* in (6) below.

6) The workers which doesn't like expensive school-travel, can arived to the Paris and then lives like homeless. By two days they must eat, dress and sleept like homelless in Paris.

The misselection of the preposition *to* is caused directly by interference from Polish (cf. *przyjechać do Paryża*). The presence of *by* is even more interesting – the Polish preposition *przez* translates as *for* in this context, the learner opts for *by*, however, which is the standard equivalent of *przez* in passive sentences (the *by*-agentive phrase).

On the other hand, the German phrase *was für* + NP, as in the expression *Was für eine Überraschung* (What a surprise!) may prove troublesome to an

---

[2] There is a substantial body of literature to suggest that Universal Grammar is available in some form in foreign language learning (cf. for example Epstein et al.: 1996; Herschensohn 2000). I have repeatedly defended the view that foreign language learning is UG-free and is driven forward by general problem solving mechanisms (cf. Gozdawa-Gołębiowski 2003: 57-75, 2004b).

English-speaking learner due to the lexical choices it requires (lit. *what for a surprise*), while the Polish equivalent of the phrase makes use of the sequence *co za* (lit. *what for*) and so there will be a transfer-based reason for employing the preposition *für*, otherwise poorly motivated on semantic grounds. In areas where transfer (positive or negative) does not suggest possible morpholexical choices to the learner, the ultimate decision will be made randomly until the learner discovers the relevant rule. If none is forthcoming, near-native intuitions are unlikely to develop. The pattern of determiner use in the phrases *in **the** last resort* and *as **a** last resort* is baffling even to advanced students because no easily accessible rule can naturally account for it. Both sequences are, of course, highly formulaic, but the problem with formulaic language, is that it remains opaque and unpredictable to the learner – he will know the correct answer if and only if he has come across the expression frequently enough to register it mentally and memorize it as a complete chunk.

Needless to say, points (1b) and (1c) appear in tandem, as illustrated in 7(a-c) below.

7) a. People who was worked in travel agency "Kamstra Travel".
b. If you are borned of your life change it.
c. The person who want joined to this had to leave all many and credit cards in deposit.

What is eye-catching about the examples in (7) is the use of incorrect prepositions (*bored of, joined to*) and the failure to adjust uninterpretable inflectional features on the one hand (cf. the variability in the formation of relative clauses, the singular-plural mismatch or the misuse of the article system), and on the other hand the all-pervasive transfer from Polish at the level of morphosyntax and lexicon. One will look to grammar rules to eliminate the mismatch of uninterpretable features (e.g. to help the learner realize that *people who worked* is to be preferred to the ill-formed *people who was worked* and suggest ways of proceduralising that knowledge).

Unsurprisingly, lexical violations (cf. 1a above) have a very different flavour and traditional grammar explanations will not be an effective measure to eradicate them. Consider (8).

8) a. The residents of boxes have to take care about themselves.
b. People who would take part (...) will take care for themselves.
c. The employees (...) may take advantages of the offer.
d. Those brave people who have decided for it, are under the help of bodyguards.

We are looking here at the violations of strong word partnerships: *take advantage, take care of, under the protection of*. It is a fact about *take* that it allows *advantage* to follow it but disallows *advantages*. To be more precise, it is a fact about *take* **and** *advantage* that no inflectional tampering with the noun

advantage is permitted.[3] In other contexts *take* easily appears with plural nouns, as evidenced by *take photographs, steps, measures, all sorts*. Likewise, *advantages* is frequently encountered with *have, offer, bring*, etc. Native usage reflects the preferences of individual lexical items: no formal grammar lesson will prepare you for the difference between *care about* vs. *take care of*. This may be reflected in a good dictionary, not in a grammar book.

III. PEDAGOGICAL COUNTERMEASURES – TOWARDS THE THREE-MODE SYSTEM

Notice that the two procedures (rule-based explanation and dictionary-based selection) are not equally useful in the foreign language classroom. That is so because stability is commonly associated with some sort of grammatical regularity and the learner naturally strives to build his interlanguage on stable foundations. How can we help, then, with the successful teaching of the system?

One should begin by exploring positive L1/L2 transfer in the area of lexis and grammar. Alternatively, an account of L2 facts should be sought which does not rely on explicit crosslinguistic contrasts but draws differential comparisons with other L2 facts or relates the observed patterns to some more general linguistic theory. Only as a last resort do we employ word-lists and "unaided" memorization.

The one area where generalizations are hard to come by and memorization techniques flourish is formulaic language (cf. point 1a above). Major work on formulaicity (Skehan 1998; Wray 2002) distinguishes two processing modes: analytic and holistic (also referred to as lexical). The former thrives on decomposition (for comprehension purposes) and rule-based synthesis (in production), it slows down communication but underlies the outbursts of linguistic creativity, the latter targets complete word chunks and stores them as single units, enabling efficient on-line message processing and adding the native flavour to every-day exchanges. One of the most common communicative strategies employed in everyday **native** exchanges is to eschew the analytic mode and to work in the holistic mode. For obvious reasons formulaic language is a perfect candidate for holistic processing.

A foreign language learner does not know many formulas. Nor is he conversant with the grammatical system. He will, therefore, rely on individu-

[3] This is the essence of formulaicity. There is a long list of researchers who have contributed substantially to our understanding of the concept and its applications to teaching. Let me just mention a few of those who influenced my thinking about grammar, lexicon and formulaic language: Pawley and Syder 1983, Sinclair 1991, Nattinger/DeCarrico 1992, Skehan 1998, Moon 1998, Wray 2002, Schmitt (2004).

al lexical items and use common-sense clues to arrive at the ultimate meaning of the message. This is neither the analytic nor the holistic approach. This middle-of-the-road position represents a dangerous strategy in many ways, as it prevents the growth of interlanguage formulaic resources and of the grammatical system but it is surprisingly effective for communicative purposes. I will call this mode of (non-holistic) sentence processing contentive mode or c-mode.

Consequently, there seem to be three ways for a language user (native or foreign) to process linguistic information:

a) analytic (with conscious reference to the grammatical system)

b) contentive (with attention paid to individual lexical items, mostly the meaning-bearing elements)

c) holistic (formulaic, where whole chunks are attended to)

This is a major departure from the commonly accepted two-mode system. As the examples below demonstrate, however, the introduction of the interim contentive, non-holistic mode of sentence processing finds empirical support in the data. Consider the samples in (9).

9) a. The Dutch travel agency "Kamstra Travel" offers original training courses for employees under the bridges in Paris. The employees, protected by security, can live like homeless people for two days: they can't have any credit cards, their own money, they have to change their clothes, find something to sleep on and some money for food. The authorities of Paris are informed about courses, so there are no problems with the local police.

b. The Kamstra travel offered very good lessons for employes who are bored with learning in egzotic countries. People who would take part must in course will take care for themselves. they would be live almost in extreme conditions. At this two-weeks course the members should have to help to each other. Besides the members will be protect by the bodyguards.

c. One of the Holender's travel offices gave an offert for those who had expected some more "exciting" or just different courses. Interested are offerd two-day lasting course during which, having no money and food they have to deal with their needs all by themselves. Travel Company stays in touch with gevernment and police so everyone can feel safe, living even under bridge, perhaps looking forward to getting a bed in a hotel after all, as a reward, I suppose.

(9a) illustrates the analytic mode, with a predominant focus on form, and few formulaic sequences in sight. Consequently, the text is distinctly unidiomatic but the percentage of overt system errors is relatively low and whenever they do occur (*the authorities of Paris, informed about courses*) this does not lead to a communication breakdown.

(9b) on the other hand is fraught with system errors. However, the message remains discernible, due to the presence of the key lexical elements,

stripped of their grammatical valence but capable of activating a coherent cognitive script (*employees – take – part – course – live – extreme conditions – two weeks*). Except for a few random instances, the text does not feature any strong collocations or well-established formulas. It is because of texts such as (9b) above that we need to seriously consider a purely lexical alternative to the tradition-sanctioned division between analytic and holistic modes.

Text (9c) presents the reader with a number of formulas, unavailable in the purely analytic or purely lexical (contentive) modes: *deal with X all by oneself, stay in touch with, look forward to + V-ing, as a reward, I suppose.* It does contain a number of deviations from the L1 norm, possibly arising due to insufficient self-monitoring: the article system (*government, travel company, under bridge*), inadequate lexical choices (*Hollender, offert*), grammar violations (*interested are offered*). What is perhaps most relevant for our immediate purposes, out of the 125 samples reviewed only about forty percent exhibit any formulaic language at all! This can be taken as a serious indication that learners prefer contentive and analytic processing to holistic storage and retrieval even at the intermediate B1 level.

In fact, it is the 'lexical shortcut' (i.e. the contentive mode) which remains the favourite communication strategy for many L2 users. This explains the notorious insensitivity of many L2ers to overt system markers. This can be seen in the following examples, with the learners attempting passive constructions.

10) a. Besides the members will be protect by the bodyguards.
b. [They] try to manage (...) but they guard by security.
c. Strange courses are offering by Kamstra Travel.

The 'lexically-oriented' learner selects the functionally prominent items for interpretation, ignoring the uninterpretable features imposed by the grammatical system.

IV. FORMULAICITY REVISITED

Paradoxically, one of the advantages of the contentive (non-holistic) mode may be the more effective treatment of certain formulaic sequences. A defining feature of a formula is that it resides in the mind. A string of words is formulaic because a statistically significant group of native speakers accesses it as a complete chunk without needing to decompose it. In fact, even the 'statistically significant' proviso is immaterial, anything that a native speaker stores and uses holistically with some threshold frequency is a formula. Put as simply as possible, how do we know that something *is* a formula? Because native speakers behave as if it was. How does that help a foreign language learner? It doesn't.

Instead of the formulaic / non-formulaic continuum, let us introduce a distinction between what is idiosyncratic and what is rule-based. In due course both types undergo proceduralization (automatization) by the learner.

Any material that has been automatized is recognised by the language faculty as formulaic. This has important pedagogic consequences. A string of words should be treated as a formulaic sequence for classroom purposes if there is no accessible rule that can explain the specific co-occurrence pattern or if there is no L1 analogue to draw upon. I think one could go even further than that and claim that a strong formula is one where a false L1 analogy suggests itself (as in the case of *take into consideration*, where care should be taken to prevent the unwanted transfer of the preposition, which results in *take under consideration*). In other words, the question of what is and what is not formulaic is a meaningless question to ask in the early and intermediate stages of foreign language learning. The real issue is to distinguish between what is and what is not predictable, based on L1 transfer and/or grammatical generalizations.

Rule-based sequences will not undergo automatization unless they have been put together from scratch by applying rules with sufficient threshold frequency. This may markedly slow down the time needed to comprehend / produce any given sequence but the trend towards compositionality is psychologically real – adult learning is about having the building blocks and a set of guidelines for putting them together. Needless to say, committing non-formulaic sequences to memory and thus turning them into formulas serves a useful pedagogical purpose and will frequently be encouraged by the teacher.

By allowing both rule-based (transparent) and opaque sequences to become memorized as complete chunks (structural exemplars or semantic tokens) we are arguing for the rejection of clear-cut boundaries between grammar, lexis and formulaic expressions.

There are numerous practical implications of the analytic-contentive-holistic continuum for classroom work:

– encouraging holistic processing over and above contentive processing by showing cases where word-based cognitive scripts yield inadequate results;

– training the learners to switch into the analytic mode whenever system resources are robust enough, as this permits creativity, an all-important factor in language teaching;

– encouraging communication in the lexical mode as the early-available communication strategy; tasks have to vary in terms of language functions and communicative objectives to prevent unwanted fossilization, and the teacher should provide feedback immediately after the task or unobtrusively while the task is in progress;

– training the learners to pay attention to the form and not merely to the content of the messages they are exposed to.

It is no use fighting the contentive or the analytic modes. We need to try and use them all to our advantage, instead. The guidelines do seem to be in conflict, however. For example, contentive processing precludes analytical reasoning and form-focused activities do not go hand in hand with the holistic strategy adopted for satisfying immediate communicative purposes. The tensions reflect the true nature of everyday linguistic behaviour, both in the native and foreign language context, and they should have an impact on foreign language teaching practice. The Analytic-Contentive-Holistic model of foreign language teaching allows all three modes to be instrumental in achieving different communicative goals by the learner.

It follows, therefore, that the very term *formula* may be understood at least in four different ways. Here are the basic options:

A) **Formulas as bundles of opaque features** – a formula is a sequence of two or more words/morphemes (adjacent or otherwise) with irregular meaning, function or distribution. The irregularity is determined with respect to the currently available resources.

B) **Formulas as recurrent units** – a formula is a sequence of two or more words/morphemes (adjacent or otherwise) that are noticed in the input because they appear with more than random frequency.

C) **Formulas as social tokens** – a formula is a sequence of two or more words/morphemes (adjacent or otherwise) that are noticed in the input because of their communicative usefulness or social importance.

D) **Formulas as morphosyntactic exemplars** – a formula is a sequence of two or more words/morphemes (adjacent or otherwise) which have been brought to the student's attention as instantiations of a productive process.

All four definitions[4] have a role to play in the learner's struggles with the alien system and need to be represented in the teaching materials and practice sessions in the classroom. Here is just one example to shed some light on the proposed categorization. Suppose that a Polish pre-intermediate learner of German as a foreign language comes across the verb *abheben* in the context of sentence (11).

11) Ich muss noch schnell zum Bankautomaten, um Geld abzuheben.
I must still quickly to-the cashpoint (for) money to-withdraw.

Given that the remaining words are known or recognisable, the meaning of *abheben* is fairly transparent contextually. Yet it would be a waste of a perfect opportunity to let it go at that, without exploring any further. For the teacher and the learner just about everything about that sentence may be (should be) formulaic. The characteristic omission of the verb *gehen* (go) in

[4] The affinity with Goldberg's definition of a construction (for example Goldberg 2006: 5) is striking, especially for definitions A and B, but not entirely unexpected.

the first part, makes *Ich muss noch schnell zu(m)* a formula in the first sense. Many internal constituents within that sentence stand a good chance of becoming proceduralized due to frequency of use: *noch schnell, ich muss noch schnell, um Geld abzuheben,* thereby satisfying criterion B. The sentence frame *Ich muss ... (zu) ... um... zu...* serves to introduce all sorts of useful pragmatic concepts, or *functions* in standard textbook terminology, becoming indispensable for efficient communication (Option C). Finally, the learner may be encouraged to memorise the sentence for the wealth of low-order morphological and syntactic information it exemplifies, thereby creating a useful point of reference for future uses. Formulas as exemplars, Option D above, illustrate what James (1994: 205-207) has referred to as direct positive evidence - instances of natural idiomatic language use, with the learner's attention being drawn overtly to the form of the utterance. The shape of the dative for *Bankautomat,* the splitting of the verb with *zu,* the syntax of adverbial clauses of purpose, the structure of the embedded clause, the position of the embedded verb, preposition + article contraction, properties of modal verbs all come to the fore in a relatively simple and lexically unsophisticated German sentence. Clearly, Option D encourages decomposition to bring out the salient features of German grammar.

This can work wonders in the classroom, as the student experiences *déjà vu,* new grammatical facts are explained with reference to lexical material that he or she already knows. Anything that defies explanation should profitably be approached as an idiosyncratic property of a given lexical item. With reference to the verb *abheben* this strongly suggests the search for straightforward lexical matching even if the interlingual equivalence should turn out to be incomplete. And so *odbierać* (rather than (*wyjmować/withdraw*) wins as a contextual equivalent of *abheben* because both the Polish and the German verbs are homonymous in exactly the same way (*abheben* means *to withdraw money* or *answer the phone* and so may the Polish verb *odbierać,* whereas *wyjmować* could not).

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper I have looked at some aspects of foreign language processing and how it differs from the mechanisms employed in natural native exchanges. I have argued for a three-way division of processing modes/learning strategies into analytic, holistic and contentive. This new perspective necessitates a change in the way formulaic language should be approached for teaching purposes. I have proposed defining a formulaic chunk as a grammatical, social or statistical phenomenon, thereby implying the inadequacy of the standard grammar/lexis dichotomy.

Should this reasoning prove to be essentially correct, many changes in foreign language teaching procedures must logically follow. This becomes a particularly pressing issue at a time when knowing foreign languages is no longer a luxury but an indispensable tool for successful daily communication.

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