THE ROLE OF SEMANTICS IN GENERATIVE AND COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

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Annotation: *The article describes vastly different views on the role of semantics in generative and cognitive linguistics.*

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The relationship between language and the human experience is too strong to be separated. The way in which a native language relates to the speakers' thinking can never fully be stripped away. When acquiring a second language, the first language's semantics will affect the process. Any effects of the L1 semantics on the L2 semantics will cause a non-native speaker to fall short of a target level of semantic comprehension. Whether studying language from a generative or cognitive perspective, semantics is an important area of study. Language is the medium through which humans conceptualize, categorize and comment on their reality. The way in which language is used to covey the real world affects how speakers conceive the world around them. Generative linguistics takes a minimalist position on the role of semantics in language; cognitive linguistics assigns semantic meaning to every part of language. Cognitive linguistics assumes a maximized role of semantics in language. It allows for the study of meaning at not only the lexical level, but also the syntactic level. When acquiring a second language, the system of the L1 semantic conceptualization will affect the L2 in a way that will not allow for a native level of semantic comprehension.[3]

The way semantics works within a specific language framework directly relates to how the framework treats language as a whole. Generative linguistics assumes a minimal role of semantics, which relates to the minimalist tendencies of generative grammar.[6] Cognitive linguistics assigns a maximized role for semantics that mirrors the role given to language in the cognitive experience. Understanding the way semantics relates to generative and cognitive linguistics respectively facilitates an analyses of SLA research done from both perspectives.

Generative Linguistics

Generative linguistics began as a short book written by Noam Chomsky and has become the inescapable standard of linguistic study. Chomsky's theories rely on an assumed finite and universal genetic linguistic capacity in all normal human brains. Although revolutionary in its original place and time, the concepts of a generative grammar are being challenged with great frequency by linguists who acknowledge the difficulty in separating language from other cognitive processes. The difficulty of pinning down word meanings in a given language caused generative grammar theorists to adopt a restricted role

for semantics. This theory posits, "the basic structure of a sentence is a syntactic one, and that semantics only comes in as an interpretation of those syntactic structures"[5]. This is in contrast to the initial theory, confusingly called Generative Semantics, that the underlying sentence structure is a fusion of semantics and syntax. Accepting Interpretative Semantics in generative Grammar marks an important split that eventually gives birth to cognitive semantics. Chisom's decision to accept the restrictive Interpretative Semantic framework into generative grammar marks a turning point for cognitive linguistics and cognitive semantics. Since language is a part of the entire human cognitive experience, meaning will be assigned to every aspect of language.

Research and Theories on Semantics in Second Language Acquisition

Generative SLA Research and Theories

SLA researchers maintain the minimalist role of Interpretative Semantics in their research, while cognitivists accept a larger role of semantics. The Feature Assembly Hypothesis employs the concept of a universal set of features that are present in every standard human brain. Assembling the particular lexical items of a second language (L2) requires that the learner reconfigure features from the way these are represented in the first language. A lack of native-like semantic comprehension suggests some issues in acquisition. An inability to accept native constructions can suggest an incompatible semantic-concept relation in the L2 because of the L1. Hawkins et al. researched the effects of verbal raising on non-native learners of Spanish. Slabakova and Montrul studied the effect of aspectual shifts on the semantic compression of English by learners from various L1's.

The Relationship Between Semantics and Thought

Language and thought have always had strong ties in theoretical terms. It is not the case that language precedes thought; however, there is an important relationship between language and thought. Different languages conceptualize the world differently with different salient features. This can cause issues in the acquisition of a second language because of the vast differences possible between the L1 and L2. It could be assumed that a transitive verb that requires an agent and clearly indicates a change of state in the patient could be prototypically transitive hit is a prime example. If transitive verbs like hit are the prototype, verbs that require three participants, like send, would be less prototypical. When an L1 and L2 exhibit different syntactic or lexical prototypes with different features, the L2 system will not be the same as a native speaker. [3]

Semantics simply is the relationship between meaning and form. In cognitive linguistics, the role of semantics is maximized to the point where all areas of inquiry are affected by it. The role semantics plays in a given linguistic tradition is extended to its role in SLA. When acquiring an L1, a learner is entering into a language with its own specific categorizations and conceptualizations about the world. Differences between the L1 and L2 can cause learners to fall short of acquiring a native-like target level of acquisition. A non-native speaker has two distinct conceptualizations of the world through which they can communicate. The L1 can facilitate acquisition in areas of similarity, whether actual or perceived, and can hamper acquisition in areas of dissimilarity.

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