

Form and Meaning: Multiple Perspectives

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Printer: Odyssey Press, Inc.

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Heinle & Heinle Publishers
20 Park Plaza
Boston, MA 02116

UK/EUROPE/MIDDLE EAST:
Thomson Learning
Berkshire House
168-173 High Holborn
London, WC1V 7AA, United Kingdom

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28015-Madrid
Espana

ISBN: 0-8384-0846-X

Printed in the United States of America
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 03 02 01 00 99

INTRODUCTION

Current language instruction is characterized by an antinomy between communicative goals and a linear grammatical syllabus. The belief persists among language teachers that effective communication requires the control (often spoken of as mastery) of a predetermined set of grammatical features. Furthermore, these features are to be taught according to a rigorous linear procedure involving explanation, mechanical drill, meaningful exercises, and simulated communicative use. In the final analysis, it is generally the presence of this latter phase that buttresses claims about the communicative nature of language instruction. As Carl Blyth underscores in this volume, this view of the role of grammar rests on a combination of behaviorism, structural linguistics, and cognitive-code theory. It also reduces the scope of grammar to isolated sentences rather than discourse and fails to link structural features—phonological and grammatical—to the functions performed by language, namely linking form with meaning, speech acts, and the marking of social identity.

Research on untutored or naturalistic second-language acquisition has been applied to formal language instruction, associating communication with negotiation of meaning in highly contextualized situations. In reaction to reductionist applications of this research, a renewed emphasis on formal treatment of grammar has emerged. VanPatten (1988) examined the evidence used to argue for or against explicit grammar teaching in language instruction and concluded by calling for a redirection of the debate. He proposed that the debate should not center on whether to teach grammar but rather on *how* to teach grammar. The debate has generated new terminology, and the emphasis on formal treatment of grammar bears the label “focus on form, FonF.” In this volume Cristina Sanz adds that, in addition to debating how to teach grammar (i.e., how to FonF), consideration must be given to when to focus on form, and how frequently. In developing his ideas, VanPatten proposed what he termed “processing instruction,” based on psycholinguistic research (Lee and VanPatten 1995; VanPatten 1996). Processing instruction relies on structured input activities that direct language learners to process the input for meaning, but in so doing, they must also process it for form. Clearly this work has helped

to frame a contemporary discussion of form in language learning and teaching that builds upon the undeniable contributions of structural linguistics, but which also takes into account the broadened view of the relationship between language and communication fostered by the concept of communicative competence and sociolinguistically oriented research.

The chapters of this volume of the AAUSC series seek to define, describe, and account for the terms “form” and “meaning” from different perspectives and conclude with their broadest applications. They fall into three sets: the first group of chapters addresses theoretical and methodological issues; the second examines broad curricular and educational issues; the third section describes more specific pedagogical interventions or studies that point to the pedagogical applicability of some aspects of FonF.

The four chapters of the first section define, describe, and account for the term “form” from different research domains. The overall goal of this part of the volume is to explain for teachers the construct of FonF and the pedagogical approach that, although it steers a straight communicative path, pushes learners to attend to a set of targeted linguistic forms. In the past three decades second-language acquisition (SLA) research has progressively adopted a psycholinguistic orientation. Starting from Krashen’s now severely questioned notion of comprehensible input as the engine that drives language acquisition, workers in the field have charted a more complex path that leads from exposure to comprehensible input to learner’s production. They have also isolated various stages where, in instructed second- and foreign-language learning, various pedagogical interventions are possible to assist learners in noticing critical features: noticing and awareness of critical features of input, processing and modification of input leading to intake, and producing output that approximates well-formed target language (TL). Earlier research on SLA was dominated by applied linguists associated with the teaching of English as a second language (ESL). The influence of this research was relayed by that conducted in conjunction with Canadian immersion programs. As a result, SLA researchers associated with classroom language learning were in the position of receivers of theoretical concepts and research methodologies rather than initiators. But the total context of these two leading edge areas of SLA differed strikingly from that of the FL classroom. For example, ESL learners have opportunities for natural language learning outside of class, and immersion instruction is imparted to younger learners;

its goal is dual: acquisition of content by means of the TL and incidental—although considerable—learning of the medium for the transmission of content knowledge. In contrast, the research discussed in these four chapters explores the language learning of young adults who receive their input wholly in the FL classroom. It represents a significant shift in SLA research because in this central domain FL researchers take a leading role in formulating theories and devising research methodologies.

Cristina Sanz' opening contribution sets the framework for FonF by situating it in communicatively oriented FL teaching; one might note, however, that as Kinginger insightfully observes in this volume, in our society, the sociocultural setting of our schools imposes severe constraints on such an approach and induces resistance toward it, not only on the part of teachers but also, more important, on the part of the learners themselves. Setting itself the goal of accurate as well as meaningful learner production, FonF opts for a middle course between exclusively meaning-based instruction characterized by Canadian immersion programs and the Natural Approach, and traditional instruction that follows a predetermined linear structural syllabus and focuses on the acquisition of forms for their own sake, labeled Focus on FormS by Michael Long.

Sanz addresses the specific issue of “what” forms to focus on in FonF, for that approach, unlike traditional instruction, does not pretend to teach and correct all forms, but only those that are more difficult to process and, consequently, to acquire. She sets forth two sets of criteria that may be utilized to assess levels of difficulty: external and internal. The latter are general processing factors shared by L1 and L2 acquisition. For example, given the easier processibility of the syntactic order SVO, as demonstrated by restructuring in L1 and also in pidginization, learners will reinterpret other orders according to that syntactic pattern; for example, this accounts for American learners misunderstanding *La saluda los niños* “the children greet her” as “she greets the children.” External factors reside in the nature of the forms themselves: frequency, salience (their position in an utterance, whether they are free or bound, their amount of phonetic substance), processing complexity (the demand forms make on short-term memory), communicative value, and variability. Exemplifying these criteria with Spanish forms, Sanz observes that clitic pronouns are more difficult to acquire than morphological features that are traditionally considered complex: namely, the preterit versus imperfect contrast, the subjunctive mood, and the use of the copula verbs *ser*

versus *estar*. In connection with the latter contrast, she points out that the level of difficulty is a function of its lack of semantic sharpness that has stymied grammarians and linguists alike and the variability it shows across groups of native speakers of Spanish. The fact that some native speakers, especially those that evolve in bilingual environments, such as the Hispanics from East Los Angeles, simplify the grammar by generalizing the use of *estar* raises an interesting sociolinguistic issue. It would seem that to reduce the complexity of forms and thus facilitate their processing and acquisition by learners, FL teachers should aim, at least as a first approximation, at a pedagogical norm that is simpler than the standard version of the TL, generally the most complexified norm found in the TL communities (see Valdman 1992, cited by Blyth in this volume). In the pedagogically oriented coda of her contribution Sanz mentions several useful notions that should be incorporated in teacher training: the distinction between rule-based and exemplar acquisition (the latter type of acquisition is related to chunking, the memorization of individual items, some of phrase length, that the mim-mem approach of the fifties and sixties failed to understand fully) and the cyclical syllabus that allows one to accommodate acquisitional sequences. Difficult structures that cannot fully be put in place at an early stage of instruction because they belong to late stages of acquisition may be presented again periodically with incremental complexification so that learners acquire full control at later stages of instruction.

James Lee starts from the principle, resonated in several of the other contributions of the volume, that acquiring language (versus comprehending it) requires linking meaning to forms that encode it. He then discusses five types of input and the type of pedagogical intervention that may be operated on each: comprehensible input, simplified input, enhanced input, interactionally modified input, and structured input. He argues that the major weakness of Krashen's Comprehensible Input hypothesis, both the i and the $i + 1$ threshold points that define that type of input, from the FonF perspective is that they involve meaning only and exclude any reference to form. The notion of simplified input also shares this exclusion of focus on the acquisition of forms without which "the potential for language development has been missed." Research on this construct focuses on the effect on comprehension of various types of simplifications of input—slowed down speech, repetitions, using high frequency vocabulary, and so on. Comprehension also is viewed unidirectionally, that is, as

excluding the negotiation that characterizes communicative interactions. In enhanced input, the more proficient interactant proceeds beyond comprehension checks to try to influence the performance of the learner by expanding or recasting the latter's output and providing a more accurate target form. In interactionally modified input, the bidirectional negotiation of meaning between the interactants results in FonF and provides potential for the learner to acquire forms. Structured input goes one step further in providing learners guidance toward the acquisition of specific forms. This guidance is achieved by creating situations in the classroom where only by processing forms for meaning can learners comprehend the input. Lee concludes with broad pedagogical implications of his analysis of input types: to include negotiated interactions that provide learners with input as rich and comprehensible as possible but also lead them to process it so that they can effect the form to meaning linkages inherent in linguistic communication.

In a sense, Bill VanPatten takes off where Lee leaves off by clarifying the nature and role of structured input; but, more important, he lays out the psycholinguistic bases for input processing strategies, namely, the central role of working memory and the limited capacity for processing information that leads learners to focus on meaning-bearing elements in attending to incoming input. They lead, for example, to a preference for lexical items over function words and grammatical endings, and among those grammatical endings, those that have the greatest semantic value over those that are semantically and functionally redundant. The first part of the chapter describes and illustrates with actual pedagogical exemplars the construct of input processing. The pedagogical application of the concept, processing instruction, requires that the focus always be on meaning, that only one form and one function be targeted in an individual task, and that learners always be actively engaged with the input by means of what VanPatten refers to as referential activities that comport an affective dimension, the personal involvement of the learner. The second part addresses criticisms leveled at processing instruction (PI) and counters evidence to the research studies intended to demonstrate the validity of that construct. To the claim that PI is not grounded in any theory, VanPatten responds that this criticism stems from a reductionist interpretation that equates a complex approach with mere exposure to targeted forms. To the criticism that PI was employed only for simple structures he retorts that its superiority to traditional approaches was demonstrated

with a wide range of features reputed to be difficult, such as the Spanish subjunctive which involves interclause dependency. After countering alleged research design flaws in comparison studies devised to support it, VanPatten discusses the role of output in PI. He stresses the fact that, although it is necessary, input is not sufficient for developing the ability to use the TL in a communicative setting; attention to output must be included. Thus focus on output is not incompatible with PI. There is one limitation of PI that he grants: the absence of studies about the durable effect of the approach; in experimental studies the retention period seldom exceeded one month. In commenting on the implications of PI for language program direction, VanPatten reminds us that language teachers tend to teach as they were taught and in implementing PI often retain traditional features that, if they have no negative effect on the innovative approach, are without value within its framework.

Ronald Leow focuses on the first stage of the language acquisition chain, awareness. He reviews an impressively large number of experimental studies, most dealing with the learning of FLs rather than ESL, that assess the relationship between various types of awareness and linguistic development. Before forms present in the input can be processed by the learners and stored in available short-term memory, they must be noticed by them. If learners are to attend to meaning while concurrently making a conscious effort to attend to targeted forms, what sort of procedures can make these features more salient so that they can be more readily noticed? According to Leow a considerable amount of SLA research indicates that implicit procedures for awareness enhancement, such as input flooding (providing numerous exemplars of the feature in the input) or writing enhancement (highlighting the targeted feature by various typographical devices), prove to be less effective in accelerating acquisition and advancing language development than a variety of types of explicit approaches: explicit instruction, garden pathing (in which learners are led to notice the targeted feature by being induced to make erroneous overgeneralizations), consciousness raising, and so on. More important, acquired forms are retained for longer periods. Among the pedagogical recommendations that emerge from this thorough review of research is the design of classroom tasks to promote noticing that engage learners in meaningful interactions. These imply more individualized student-centered activities to replace the traditional teacher-centered classroom. A basic problem posed in the empirical study of awareness involves the difficulty of operationalizing the

process: new on-line procedures (in addition to think-aloud protocols) and off-line ones (in addition to grammatical judgments) need to be devised. Another issue not mentioned by Leow resides in a potential confounding variable introducing the noncomparability of formal features investigated. For example, obligatory morphosyntactic features carrying little semantic value or functional import such as grammatical gender can be expected to be less noticed than, say, verb forms signaling tense or aspectual distinctions.

The chapters authored by Heidi Byrnes and Celeste Kinginger form a bridge between the properly theoretical and more “applied” parts of this volume. Both examine critically the relationship between pedagogical approaches that attempt to integrate meaningful use of the target language with the development of fluent and accurate production and the instructional setting that necessarily constrains instructional intervention.

Celeste Kinginger’s contribution opens with a syllogism about white bears in the snowbound Far North and in the Siberian city of Novoya Zemlya. Whereas illiterates would provide answers based on their experience with bears and the Far North, learners schooled in the rational discourse based on the text-based realities of the classroom most likely would respond that bears are white in that Siberian city because it is situated in the Far North. This “correct” response to the syllogism serves to remind us that the foreign language classroom forms part of a particular sociocultural context that constrains the types of activities linking form and meaning that can take place there. Kinginger points out that what she terms “technological” solutions to promote the meaningful use of language—task-based syllabi, small group and pair work, even Internet exchanges with peers in the target language community, and, we would add, FonF—run counter to the learner’s view, fostered by the sociocultural history of our schools, that the classroom is not an environment suitable for authentic communicative exchanges but for activities involving the decontextualized use of language. This no doubt accounts for requests for more focus on form (grammar in their parlance) that foreign language students make of instructors who organize the class around meaningful communicative activities. The objective of her chapter is not only to document a reality that we sometimes wish to forget but to lead us to reflect on the role of foreign language instruction as part of the general school or university curriculum. She challenges us to ask ourselves to what degree we wish to have our classrooms become appropriate environments

for communicative interaction and, if we chose to answer affirmatively, to make learners aware of the difference between discourse that reflects natural language use and discourse that is a way of understanding, namely, the rational decontextualized use of words.

Heidi Byrnes enumerates the numerous flaws of the teaching of foreign languages at the collegiate level. She highlights the difficulty of conducting meaningful research oriented toward the study of the interactive development of meaning and form and concludes by outlining a proper curriculum in which targeted acquisition of content does permit the development of a significant level of ability in the target language. As we are poignantly aware, the basic two to four semester sequence is woefully inadequate for the development of any useful linguistic ability, particularly interactive communicate skills that require the capability to comprehend and interpret a broad range of discourse types and fluent speech, as well as to achieve a command of the fundamental meaning-form links of the target languages. But Byrnes asserts, in addition, that this prototypical organization of foreign language courses hinders SLA research that can inform instructional practices. It also fosters reductionist Focus on Forms rather than the FonF that is the topic of this volume. For example, few SLA studies observe longitudinal language development. In addition, Byrnes points out, these reduced instructional sequences limit the possibilities for the types of instructional intervention that emerge from a FonF orientation, such as input enhancement and consideration of fixed developmental orders.

In the graduate research departments that Byrnes targets, a dysfunctional separation is instituted between content courses taught by the “real” faculty, generally literature scholars, and language courses viewed as peripheral to the intellectual mission of the academic unit. These are either entrusted to marginal instructional personnel—TAs, part-time instructors, or nontenurable faculty—or, increasingly, outsourced to language centers.

For Byrnes, in addition to the downgrading of SLA research and development, this has the deleterious effect of depriving advanced learners, those who expect to acquire a professional level of ability in the TL, opportunities for continued FonF. The curriculum she proposes, which is being implemented in the German Department at Georgetown University, eliminates the conventional separation of skill versus content instruction. From the very beginning students are involved in content- and

task-based activities the ultimate objective of which is the imparting of multiple literacies designed to provide them with opportunities for engagement with the culture of TL communities, the construction of coherent and cohesive discourse commensurate with their level of linguistic development, and critical thinking. One of the outcomes of the proposed long-term curriculum, Byrnes suggests, is to unify the faculty of language departments in a common endeavor and to promote greater interest in language acquisition in the highly specific collegiate setting.

The third part of this volume addresses pedagogical issues more directly. One of the limitations of FonF resides in its somewhat reductionist interpretation of linguistic form. Most research and pedagogical applications have centered on morphology (verbal tense and aspect, and gender and person agreement, for example). Few studies have borne on syntax and even fewer on aspects of forms that have pragmatic or sociolinguistic function. The four studies in this section fill this lacuna. This section consists of a chapter that explores the link between FonF and the processing and construction of discourse, and three chapters describing experimental studies. Two of these experimental studies assess the effectiveness of instructional practices: the first, of a technique useful for oral communicative interactions, and the second, of training that might facilitate reading comprehension. Two studies involve focus on lexical form; the other involves function words that contribute to textual cohesion.

Carl Blyth begins by pointing out that one of the obstacles to imparting a command of the spoken language lies in the reliance on sentence structures characteristic of the written standard language, in particular those that are supposed to express complete and perfect thoughts by adherence to the “logical” SVO order, for example, *John kissed Mary*, which contrasts with those more characteristic of oral communicative interactions such as *It was John who kissed Mary* or *Who John kissed was Mary*. According to the functional grammar perspective he adopts, the order of nouns in declarative sentences not only indicates case relations but, especially in interactive speech, also expresses a variety of pragmatic aspects of speech: the type and degree of information carried by sentence constituents, communicative intent, emphasis, and so on. In authentic interactive speech it is by various rearrangements of the linear SVO order involving inversions, clefting, and pronominalizations that speakers signal these pragmatic factors. Blyth argues that, although long thought to be impervious to formal presentation, these pragmatically conditioned

syntactic devices are amenable to systematic pedagogical treatment within a communicative approach by various activities that focus on form: garden pathing, structured input, input enhancement, and communicative tasks that require learners to perceive or produce targeted forms for their successful completion.

Turning his attention to the training of foreign language teachers, Blyth stresses the need to provide them formal instruction on the structure of discourse. Teachers need to become aware that constructing written and oral discourse requires attention to pragmatic appropriateness as well as grammatical accuracy. He admits that a focus on aspects of well-formed discourse such as topicality, presupposition, and referentiality is best reserved for more advanced levels of instruction. However, he also suggests that, although techniques for the analysis of discourse may not lead directly to more fluent communicative ability, their merit is to raise awareness about the organization of discourse, surely one of the legitimate goals of formal foreign language instruction and one that contributes to broader educational objectives of our discipline. He concludes by showing how informatics promises to enhance the study of discourse by providing unlimited access to authentic materials available on the Internet and in massive corpora and by making available software tools for automatic analysis and treatment.

Like Blyth, Mary Ellen Scullen and Sarah Jourdain challenge the long-held belief that the role of language teachers is to impart phonology, morphosyntax, and lexicon and that pragmatic aspects of language are best acquired by communicative use in the target language environment. The consequence of the traditional view is that the classroom learner never acquires knowledge and skills required for successful negotiation of meaning. These two researchers observe correctly that, given the lexical limitations of learners, successful communication requires the ability to use circumlocution strategies to describe an object whose lexical designation is unknown. They identify four types of strategies, two of which—superordinate and analogy—require establishing semantic links with the targeted unknown lexical item, and two of which—function and description—require mastery of a syntactic construction, relativization. Learners in the experimental group who were provided explicit training in the four types of strategies circumlocuted better than the control group. The study underscores the importance of FonF for more successful performance of communicative tasks. It also invites the extension of systematic attention

to form-meaning links to the relatively neglected domain of the lexicon. Two of the strategies identified by Scullen and Jourdain require acquainting instructors with the concept of lexical relations, including hyperonymy, synonymy, antonymy. The other two strategies provide another opportunity to demonstrate the fundamental premise of functional grammar, namely, the interdependency between form and function: relative clauses do not serve primarily to lead learners to construct more complex sentences but to describe things and tell what they are used for.

Among cognitively oriented specialists of second language reading research there appears to be general agreement that reading texts represents the optimal way to acquire new vocabulary. From his comprehensible input exposure perspective, Krashen has asserted that words are best acquired by processing and comprehending them in their natural context, namely connected texts. Susanne Rott put this notion to a test, as it were, by devising an experimental study designed to examine the relationship between overall comprehension of written texts and the extraction of the meaning of a targeted individual unfamiliar word by means of inferencing and reading strategies on the part of intermediate learners of German. If Krashen is correct, we would expect that those learners who make use of global reading strategies in which focus is on deriving the overall meaning of the text also would acquire and retain the meaning of targeted word lexicon. The results show that, although the subjects noticed a targeted unfamiliar word crucial to an understanding of the whole text and made an acceptable semantic inference upon encountering the first of its seven occurrences in compounds, few transferred that inference to the other instances of the targeted word, and only one of the eight learners retained the meaning two weeks after the experiment. The limited number of subjects of this qualitative study restricts the scope of the conclusions to be drawn, but the results support the claim that comprehension and production involve different cognitive processes even though they are related in some way. In other words, comprehension of a text does not necessarily lead to productive word knowledge. The results also suggest that activities that focus on lexical form, such as the ones that refer to various semantic relations (synonymy, hyperonymy, etc.), might enhance more successful and more rapid vocabulary learning. A clearer pedagogical implication of the study is that vocabulary learning constitutes an aspect of language learning subject to great individual variation. Consequently, instructors need to guide learners to use a wide variety of local and global strategies.

Catherine Fraser's study offers an excellent example of classroom action research. It was inspired by a theoretical study of the relationship between identification of anaphoric links and the process of reading (Berkemeyer 1994), which might be viewed as a type of local or bottom-up FonF. In a sense, Fraser's own study constitutes a replicative pedagogical verification of previous research, an activity the present editors warmly recommend to fellow specialists in language instruction. The research protocol she tested with advanced learners of German—seeking coreferential links between anaphoric pronouns and their textual referents—validates the theoretical construct that inspired it. But, at the same time, it can be transformed into a postreading task (an “instructional event”) within the framework of the widely accepted approach to reading comprehension wherein students' confrontation with a text is preceded by global activities and followed by local activities, some of which, such as the one emerging from Fraser's experiment, have the added advantage of acquainting students with basic metalinguistic terminology. It is interesting, though, that, as she notes, her subjects preferred to search for form/meaning links rather than taking the easy way out of metalinguistic labeling.

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