Functional-Notional Approach

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Framing the Issue

The functional-notional approach (FNA), which arose in the 1970s and was most influential during the 1980s, was an early systematic attempt to reshape traditional syllabi to serve communicative needs directly. It is also referred to as the notional-functional syllabus. FNA was conceived at a time when the advantages and shortcomings of various fairly well-defined and time-tested foreign-language teaching approaches were scrutinized in light of the increasing interdependence of European nations and hence the need for ways to speed up communicative proficiency in foreign languages. Grammar-translation (GT), the oldest of these approaches, had been used for centuries as a method of learning to read and write classical languages; in general, it pursued formal accuracy at the expense of fluency and did not promote speaking and listening. So-called direct methods, which had arisen generations earlier in reaction to GT, emphasized speaking and listening but lacked philosophical or psychological underpinnings, and served no well-articulated set of goals. The Palmer method (as used mainly in the United Kingdom) and its transatlantic cousin, the audio-lingual method, were based in behaviorist learning theory and also emphasized accuracy at the expense of fluency. All of these approaches operated from grammatical syllabi (explicit in the first case, implicit in the others) which ordered lessons in terms of ever-increasing structural complexity; none was eventually perceived to induce all-around proficiency in an optimally efficient way. The Council for Cultural Cooperation of the Council of Europe met in 1971 in search of a set of practical standards and benchmarks for the teaching and learning of foreign languages that were based on learners' ability to function successfully in a variety of communicative situations; the council sought to break down these situations into manageable types and develop materials instantiating them. One theoretical influence commonly cited was the functional approach to language analysis promoted by Halliday and his followers, which regards language as an integrated social-semiotic system rather than as a set of mental modules characterized by abstract rules (e.g., Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Halliday, 1993). A second influence came from speech act theory

(Austin, 1962), which attracted many in the linguistics community in the 1970s and, in its purest form, held that the basic units of language should be seen as purposive acts with conditions for use. An additional (if unacknowledged) influence may have been the approach taken in traditional phrasebooks for travelers, whose direct, practical value was well-attested; FNA is above all centered on what a proficient speaker needs to accomplish in a language.

Making the Case

Innovations are seldom as innovative as they claim to be. Earlier instructional approaches did not entirely neglect language functions. In a direct method or audio-lingual classroom in French, for example, a learner might be asked to listen to, model, and even memorize a prepared textbook dialogue in which a waiter and a customer in a French café interact. The waiter offers a menu to a customer; the customer asks questions about menu options and orders a meal; the waiter repeats the order and soon brings the food, which may or may not be exactly what was ordered; after dining, the diner asks for the check; the waiter obliges, takes the money, and bids the customer adieu. Within the course of the dialogue, learners witness and model acts of greeting, offering, requesting of information, description and clarification, leave-taking, and perhaps complaining. Simple exposure to language functions in real-world contexts did, then, occur in earlier approaches; however, the exposure was scattershot and lacked diversity and therefore generality. The conventions of clarification requests may differ from one social situation to another, and a variety of lexical items and grammatical structures may be possible for any given requesting situation. A learner who attempts to transfer what is learned from the dialogue to a new situation may quickly discover the transfer is not completely successful. This sort of problem begs for lesson planning that integrates dialogues with an in-depth look at the discourse functions being realized there.

How are "functions" characterized within FNA? Guntermann and Phillips (1982) define them as "the hundreds of purposes for which people communicate, either orally or in writing" (p. 5). For Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983), "any act of speech is functionally organized (that is, it is an attempt to *do* something) for a particular situation in relation to a particular topic" (p. 13). Note that functions are defined over "speech acts," not sentences; FNA writers do not get into theoretical debates over the distinction. Finocchiaro and Brumfit provide examples:

> Do [individuals] want to introduce people to each other? Do they want to invite someone to their home? Do they want to direct someone to do or not to do something? …The above are simple examples of the *functions* of language which all human beings wish to express at one time or other. (1983, p. 13)

Functions may be fulfilled through single words or frozen formulas such as "Hello" or "Thank you very much" or "Do you mind if…," or through more fluid means such as "Is it all right with/acceptable to you if I put off/postpone/delay

our meeting/get-together for another day/hour/week?" However the slots are filled, one has used language to perform the communicative function of *cancelling* an agreed-upon meeting. Van Ek (1977, pp. 45–6) groups functions into six basic, language-neutral types ("imparting and seeking factual information," "expressing and finding out intellectual attitudes," "expressing and finding out emotional attitudes," "expressing and finding out moral attitudes," "getting things done," and "socializing"). Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983, pp. 65–6) offer as general types the "personal," "interpersonal," "directive," "referential," and "imaginative." Both groupings subsume more specific functions in fairly transparent ways (thus "refusals" fall under Van Ek's "intellectual attitudes" type and Finocchiaro and Brumfit's "interpersonal" type).

The term "notion" is far less easy to define, and no two presentations converge on exactly the same description. In Van Ek's words,

> In performing … functions people express, refer to or—to use a more general term— "handle" certain notions. They will, for instance, apologize *for being late*, for being late for a *party*, for being late for a party *yesterday*, etc … Other notions are less correlated with lexical items, e.g. the notion of "possession," which may be expressed by means of a verb (*have*, *possess*, etc.) but also by means of a prepositional construction (*of* + nominal group), a genitive case or a possessive pronoun. (1977, p. 6)

Notions are meanings that are typically expressed through conventionalized means in the fulfillment of a function. The act of postponing (e.g., a date) may require a speaker to be familiar with the conventions of telling time, giving directions, describing sequences of events, and time-deictic terms such as *earlier, later, ago*, and *next (week, month)*. The act of postponing will also incidentally require familiarity with the genders, ages, numbers, social roles of interlocutors as well as their degree of intimacy, all of which may occasion shifts in the requisite notional vocabulary. Notions may phase into areas that are traditionally thought of as the domain of grammar books such as the expression of tense, aspect, and modality (TAM) in English; unlike usual textbook treatments of the grammatical features of TAM, a FNA approach grounds all discussion in the larger functional context of the lesson. The notional expressions associated with the fulfillment of one function may, of course, be relevant to the fulfillment of others; there is no claim of an exclusive relationship between a function and a notion-set. Apart from its groundedness in functions, then, a notion appears to have no clear conceptual unity within a linguistic framework; indeed, Finocchiaro and Brumfit explicitly disavow a close connection between linguistic theory and practice (1983, pp. 33, 93). This lack of connection is apparent in Jones's (1979) textbook chapter titles, which cover a motley array of topics (e.g., ability, money, passive voice, reporting, tag questions, holidays, degree, work, sequence of events), whose only internal unity appears to be their frequency of occurrence as either topics of, or expressive strategies in, discourse. Finocchiaro and Brumfit encapsulate notions as follows:

> While basic functions to be expressed depend solely on the purposes of the speaker, the specific notions depend on three major factors: (a) the *functions*,

(b) the elements in the situation, and (c) the *topic* which is being discussed. "Situations" involve all elements of contextualization. (1983, pp. 31–2)

Wilkins (1976, chap. 2) characterizes notional syllabi simply as those based on "meaningful" content rather than content that is "structural" (i.e., grammatical) or "situational" (i.e., composed of units like "buying a theater ticket," as found in direct method courses and travelers' phrasebooks). He distinguishes the two notional super-categories "semantic-grammatical" and "modal"; the former includes meanings related to time, quantity, space, person, and grammatical relations, and the latter deontic and epistemic modality; these two larger categories subsume many smaller ones. Within linguistic theory, then, functions fall broadly within the realm of pragmatics; notions are (again broadly) the semantic elements used in realizing them. While one need not conceive the fulfillment of a function as an *essentially* linguistic act—it is often possible to fulfill them via gestures or other non-linguistic signals such as pointing or bowing—the expression of notions seems more closely tied to the use of verbal language.

The potential limitations of FNA as an organizational principle for an entire curriculum were apparent almost from the beginning. Like grammatical syllabi that preceded it, FNA can tend to oversimplify the language learning task into atomistic units or modules. Unlike the units of grammatical syllabi, the actual "atoms" may be difficult to identify and keep separate (e.g., "showing agreement" overlaps heavily with "expressing solidarity"); social norms are not amenable to analysis into clear-cut systems in quite the same way as syntactic rules are. Also unlike grammatical points, language functions are difficult to organize into complexity or difficulty hierarchies, which creates a sequencing problem in syllabi and textbooks. Without rational sequencing, "how can material be articulated so that it does not appear to be a string of unrelated functions; that is, what kinds of connecting themes and transitions between functions would be appropriate?" (Guntermann & Phillips, 1982, p. 9). Though FNA may integrate grammatical points into a lesson incidentally as they arise in the presentation of a function or notion, those points may be inadequately covered as a matter of time and priorities; moreover, the sheer variety of grammatical structures needed to model a function in a fairly complete and natural way may exceed the variety of structures to which learners have been exposed at any given point in a curriculum. Thus a textbook writer or lesson planner must walk a fine line that balances discourse issues with morphosyntactic ones. That balance may sometimes not be achieved. For example, the Jones and von Baeyer (1983) textbook chapter entitled "Talking about Past Events" prompts high-intermediate learners to construct "What if …" scenarios in the past which require the use of irrealis modal constructions that some students may not control, yet the grammar of modals plays no role in chapter organization. Finally, a wholesale adoption of FNA in a curriculum may induce the same kind of criticism leveled at grammatical syllabi: that they misrepresent language and language learning as essentially a set of structural recipes that do not do justice to the complexity of discourse (Widdowson, 1979). In fairness, the textbooks referenced above go to some length to address cultural nuances.

Pedagogical Implications

Given that the classification of functions is difficult and that the actual number of identifiable functions could be expanded endlessly, some means of sorting and selection is needed for pedagogical applications. Early writers were unanimous in emphasizing the importance of needs analysis for specific classroom contexts (along the lines of what came to be called English for specific purposes) rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all model. In practice, some materials writers have seemed to aim for the latter, and a number of textbooks from the 1980s are organized around FNA, in whole or in part, with constructed dialogues (to be read and listened to) serving as datasets for learner analysis and practice. Two such books are from Tillitt and Bruder (1985) and Jones and von Baeyer (1983). The first covers openings and closings; introductions and address systems; invitations; thanking exchanges; apologies; complaint and compliment exchanges; getting and holding the floor and managing conversations; seeking information. Each chapter attempts to incorporate the cultural nuances of register through the inclusion of formality scales, and learners are prompted to tailor their own constructed dialogues to specific interlocutors. The second book is more ambitious and eclectic, mixing chapters on interactive functions (e.g., advice-giving, agreeing and disagreeing, complaining, information-seeking, leave-taking) with others that phase into the notional (talking about the past and future) and still others that are more commonly treated as rhetorical modes (describing, narrating, comparing and contrasting). Jones's (1979) textbook, devoted to notions alone, is testimony to their essential separateness from functions, though the book is intended to be used alongside Jones and von Baeyer (1983).

FNA arose at a time when the shortcomings of grammar-based curricula were evident and no well-developed conception of communicative syllabi existed. Other viable instructional models have since appeared on the scene including content-based instruction, task-based language teaching, and language for specific purposes that lend themselves to coherent curricula (i.e., curricula centered on content study or task fulfillment) and ground language instruction in real-world communication. These newer models further the FNA insistence that language instruction (a) teach the language rather than *about* the language, and (b) be grounded in the communicative needs and interests of learners as much as possible. Some of these models may incorporate elements of FNA as part of the course plan. For example, Matthews (1994), while conceived as an English for academic purposes textbook for college-level speaking tasks, incorporates strategies for introductions, exchanging greetings, and interruptions. This does not, however, render a "pure" FNA curriculum completely obsolete. For example, international students—even those with high scores on standardized language tests—may find sustained attention to day-to-day language functions extremely useful during their first term abroad, as there are always gaps in interactional learning when foreign languages are learned exclusively in classrooms remote from where those languages are spoken daily. At the time of this writing, the textbooks referenced here are still in print.

Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983, chap. 4) offer well-crafted, detailed guidelines for constructing a FN-oriented syllabus that begins with a careful needs assessment: what sort of communicative acts will a particular group of learners need to comprehend and perform? These will dictate the basic course elements (but not their sequencing). For a lesson plan centered on the function "making suggestions," learners are presented with one or more dialogues which will first be modeled (most likely through recordings). Class members then assume the roles in the dialogue perhaps first in larger, then smaller groups. From this point, discussion of the function itself emerges and links can be made to equivalent or alternative means for fulfilling the same function. In the process, the target language may be compared with L1s if comparison is enlightening. The linguistic alternatives that are presented will ideally illustrate variations along person, place, time, formality, and other social dimensions and include interlocutor attitude as an additional dimension where appropriate. For example, if the dialogue includes informal suggestions framed as "How about watching a movie/taking a walk/playing chess?" teacher and learners may elaborate options to include the equally informal "Let's watch a movie…" and the more formal "May I suggest that we watch a movie?" Learners' attention can be drawn to the fact that the last option may, given visual and other situational cues, be interpreted as conveying sarcasm. Links should be made to grammar where useful. For example, the frame [*How about* V + *ing* + noun phrase] can occasion a discussion of the form and use of tenseless *Wh*-questions, of *Wh*-questions in general, and of gerunds and other -*ing* forms. The original dialogue can serve as the springboard for open-ended activities in which learners alter that dialogue to fit different social situations, or construct their own dialogues illustrating the same basic function. Throughout the lesson, the teacher must make an informed decision about the language of instruction—the L1 will most likely need to be used at the lower levels, at least for part of the lesson. The progression of a FN-oriented lesson "underscores the fact that language is a system, but a *dynamic* system. It is never static, and its users can modify and recreate it, enrich and adapt it in consonance not only with changes in the real world around us, but also in the attitudes and responses of the persons with whom they interact" (Finocchiaro & Brumfit 1983, pp. 108–9).

SEE ALSO: Attitudes of Students Toward NESTs and NNESTs; Communicative Competence; Content-Based Instruction; Development of Pragmalinguistic and Pragmatic Skills in Children Versus Adult L2 Learners; English for Specific Purposes; Situational Language Teaching; Speech Act Theory and Teaching Speaking

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