

Structural Versus Semantic Syllabus The Case for English in the Compulsory Stage

Riad F. Hussein ★

★ Ph. D. in Theoretical and Applied Linguistics from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Assistant Professor at Yarmouk University, Jordan.

ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses briefly the interrelationship between linguistics and foreign language teaching methodology which is characterized by a unidirectional influence exerted by the former on the latter; the implication of this influence is that developments in linguistic theories oftentimes result in parallel developments in foreign language methodology.

This influence is most evident in the shaping of some of the foreign language methods such as the audio-lingual and the cognitive-code-learning theory (often called cognitive method for short), which drew heavily on insights and implications borrowed from Structuralism and Transformational-Generative Linguistics respectively.

In later stages, and with the shift away, in linguistics, from the study of language seen purely as a system towards the study of language use and functions, the result was the emergence of new syllabus types which incorporated non-structural elements as their basic units of organization. These syllabuses are commonly referred to as "communicative" or "semantic" syllabuses.

In semantic syllabuses the designer has a set of alternatives to choose from. His unit of organization can be any of these: functions, notions, or settings. If functions are taken as a unit of organization, then a functional syllabus is produced. If, however, notions or settings are taken, then notional syllabuses and setting-based syllabuses are produced respectively.

Most of the discussion is, however, devoted to the inadequacies of semantic syllabuses which can be criticized on several grounds: First, such syllabuses are not suitable for countries where English is used as a foreign language rather than a second language; second, such syllabuses may provide satisfactory frameworks for courses originally designed for special purposes, but their suitability for "general language courses" is as yet in doubt; third, they seem to imply a degree of structural "disorganization" because a unit dealing with a certain function will inevitably present structurally dissimilar sentences.

The paper concludes by sincerely calling for a continued adoption of structural syllabuses because a premature shift to semantic syllabuses, whose validity and practicality have not yet been confirmed, may have grave consequences. However, a suggestion is made for reconsidering the structural syllabus design, not for the purpose of replacing it but rather modifying it in such a way as to allow for further emphasis on language not only as a system of rules but also as a system through which functions can be expressed.

Introduction

In spite of Chomsky's statement (1) at a language teaching conference at Northeast University in the United States that linguistics has nothing to offer to the teaching of language, the fact remains that the two disciplines are closely interrelated. Although the teacher and the linguist view language from two different angles, the latter's view of language determines the language teacher's formulation of the basic tasks involved in foreign language teaching. The linguist's answer to the question, "What is language?" will influence the language teacher's response to the question, "What skills and knowledge are necessary for language proficiency?" It is also true that the goals of linguists differ from those of language teachers; the linguist is mainly concerned with devising a system for language description and analysis whereas the teacher is interested in pedagogical applications of language description. The aims of the linguist are therefore far removed from those of the teacher who often wonders how it is possible to relate the new findings of linguistics to actual classroom situations.

Whether linguistics and foreign language teaching are related or not, the fact of the matter is that the first has already made a very positive contribution to the second. Since the beginning of this century, language teaching has certainly gained from the studies of Daniel Jones, Palmer and Firth in England. In America, especially during the Second World War, the influence of Sapir, Bloomfield, Fries and others was even greater; "Bloomfield himself, a prominent linguist in his own right, was called upon to leave his linguistic research for a time in order to take part in the teaching of foreign language, and thus, incidentally to become "one of the founders of Linguistics Applied to Language Teaching." (Girard, 1972: 6).

The influence of linguistics on foreign language methodology is most obvious in the shaping of different teaching methods. For the purpose of illustrating this influence, we will discuss the audio-lingual and cognitive methods which were directly influenced by certain linguistic theories. The audio-lingual method, originally based on psychological and linguistic grounds, relied heavily on behaviorism and structuralism respectively. The behavioristic psychologists rejected the mentalistic interpretations of learning that had prevailed for so long. Learning was not therefore viewed as a mental process, but as a mechanical one. Teaching involved the establishment of learned connections between selected stimuli and desired responses. Conditioning the desired responses depended upon providing immediate and appropriate reinforcement.

Language Learning, although more complex, was no different from any other learning. Language, too, was composed of conditioned responses. Skinner maintains this view when he says, "In all verbal

behavior under stimulus control there are three important events to be taken into account: a stimulus, a response, and a reinforcement. These are contingent upon each other, as we have seen, in the following ways: the stimulus, acting prior to the emission of the response, sets the occasion upon which the response is likely to be reinforced. Under this contingency, through a process of operant discrimination, the stimulus becomes the occasion upon which the response is likely to be emitted". (Skinner, 1957: 81).

Several notions basic to structural linguistics were also incorporated in the audio-lingual method, the most significant of which was its focus on the oral skills - a focus which is evident in the appellation audio-lingual. This focus is directly drawn from structural linguistics which defines language as speech and not writing, the former being a primary and the latter a secondary representation of language. The second important insight has to do with the fact that "each language is a unique system and that each must be learnt within the context of its own system, not in comparison with another". (Chastain 1976; 107).

However, interference from L_1 into L_2 can not and should not be overlooked in studying the speech of foreign learners. In this context, we may mention in passing the theory of language interference between the native language and the target language as it is an offspring of structuralism. As long ago as 1957, it was suggested by Lado that explorations in the area of languages in contact (Weinreich 1953 and Hangen 1953) demonstrated "that many linguistic distortions heard among bilinguals correspond to describable differences in the languages involved." (Lado 1957: 1). This means that differences between the monolingual forms of language and forms used by bilinguals are largely to be explained by the phenomenon of interference from L_1 . Interference is thus said to account for the carry-over of L_1 patterns at all levels, linguistic and cultural, into L_2 usage. This discussion is inadequate without recalling one classical definition of interference. It is defined as "deviations from the norm of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language." (Weinreich 1953: 1).

With regard to the cognitive-code-learning theory (often called cognitive method for short) it was influenced by both Transformational Generative Grammar (T.G.G.) and cognitive psychology. Here we are only concerned with illustrating the linguistic influence. The concept of language learning as a rule-governed behavior and the competence - performance dichotomy together with its implication were directly borrowed from T.G.G. The implication of these for foreign language is a further emphasis on language structures and rules which are, in the cognitivists' view, at least, essential for language mastery.

In this context we need to discuss the meaning of the word grammar

and the place of semantics in both structural linguistics and the Transformational-Generative theory of linguistics. For structuralists and especially "Bloomfieldians" the term covers the tasks of identifying the units of phonology and syntax to the exclusion of meaning.

This attitude to meaning explains why neither Bloomfield nor his followers "made any positive contribution whatsoever to the theory or practice of semantics." (Lyons 1970a: 33).

Chomsky who was originally a student of Harris and thus influenced by structuralism, followed in the footsteps of Bloomfield and came to think of grammar as consisting of the phonology and syntax of a language which should be described as a purely formal system without reference to semantic considerations. This notion of grammar is manifested in his **Syntactic Structures** (1957).

In Chomsky (1965), however, his original model which appeared in **Syntactic Structures** was modified to accommodate semantics. "In the years that followed the publication of **Syntactic Structures**, Chomsky and his collaborators came to the conclusion that the meaning of sentences could, and should, be submitted to the same kind of precise, formal analysis as their syntactic structure, and that semantics should be included as an integral part of the grammatical analysis of language." (Lyons 1970a: 79).

Hymes (Brumfit 1979) was dissatisfied with Chomsky's model for language description. He, therefore, introduced his "communicative competence" theory in contrast to Chomsky's more narrow notion of grammatical competence.

Linguists who subscribe to the transformational school, Hymes argues, have been concerned almost exclusively with "the possible". They have focused their attention on what the rules of language system permit as possible structures. But, Hymes claims, if we confine our study to a consideration of the "possible", we shall learn little about how language is used as a means of communication between humans. Other factors need to be taken into account. The first deals with feasibility. A sentence like 'the mouse the cat the dog the man the woman married beat chased ate had a white tail' is grammatically correct but is hardly feasible "and can not therefore be said to form part of our competence." (Brumfit 1979: 14). The second factor covers appropriateness rules which are part of the speaker-listener's underlying competence. Hymes' final notion relates to the area which we commonly refer to as "accepted usage".

Emphasis on Language Structure

A careful examination of (EFL) textbooks written until recently reveals that they were written on a structural basis due to the influence exerted by

traditional and structural grammars. Each unit or lesson deals with a given structure which is to be drilled and practised by learners. Following are some structures that are typically found in a primary English reader:

1. This/that is a **noun**. It's a / the **noun**.
2. The **noun** is **adjective**. **Pronoun** is an **adjective** + **noun**.
3. There is a **noun** + **place adverb**. How many **plural nouns** are there?
4. **Noun** is as **adjective** as noun. **Noun** is made of **substance**.

Mastery of language structure was seen as the ultimate goal of foreign language teaching since the early forties and fifties. In line with this it was believed by both teachers and textbook writers that for learners to be proficient in the foreign language, they must master the mechanisms by which the language works. Foreign language learning was therefore reduced to a process in which learners focus on drills and structures without using them for self-expression. Amongst the activities that constantly preoccupied students' minds were the following: how to form declarative, interrogative, and negative sentences, how to use contracted forms and make tag questions, etc. The learning of these forms was reinforced by lengthy sessions of practice until the learners became satisfactorily familiar with them.

The emphasis on language structure is reflected in the way the lessons were written where the content of each lesson was centered around a structure or a small number of related structures. Sentences used in any lesson were artificial, non-authentic English concocted especially to illustrate a certain structure. The ultimate goal of teaching was to introduce the main structures of the English language system. "A structure is taught in this manner: teachers present it, then students drill it and practice it in context then they proceed to the next structure." (Brumfit 1979: 183).

Structural syllabuses therefore focus exclusively on structures and are so similar that they constitute a carbon copy, with minor alterations in some cases, of a prototype syllabus. This similarity may be attributed to the fact that "structure" is the item constantly used as a basic unit of organization.

Out of fairness, we ought to mention that in spite of extreme emphasis on structures in structural syllabuses, teachers paid some attention to signification. By signification we mean what a given structure signifies or means; for instance, whereas "shall" and "will" signify futurity, "for" and "since" draw a distinction between the notion of a "point of time" and the notion of a "period of time" respectively. Halliday makes it clear "that no teacher introduces "shall" and "will" (for example) without relating the structure implicitly or explicitly to a conceptual meaning, usually that of futurity; nor would we teach (or be able to teach) the English article system without recourse to the concepts of countableness

and uncountableness.” (Brumfit 1979: 2).

Success or failure in the foreign language was measured in terms of the learner’s ability to manipulate the structures and not in terms of his ability to use the language for performing the diverse functions of language. Excessive concern with language structures resulted in what Johnson calls “systemic students” who may be structurally competent but can not communicate effectively. Newmark comments on the phenomenon of the systemic student “who may know the structures that the linguist teaches, yet can not know that the way to get his cigarette lit by a stranger when he has no matches is to walk up to him and say one of the utterances, “Do you have a light?” or “Got a match?” (Not one of the equally well-formed questions “Do you have a fire?” or “Do you have illumination?” or “Are you a match’s owner?” (Johnson 1982: 121).

“What does a person have to “know” in order to master a foreign language properly?” In response, Johnson (1982: 20) asserts that he has to know how the language operates as a system, and this requires a knowledge of rules and structure; such knowledge was not of course overlooked by teachers. He also has to “know” the signification of language. The student who does not know that “shall/will” can be used to signify futurity will be unable to use this part of the language system correctly. As mentioned earlier, teachers did not completely ignore the teaching of signification but it was relegated to a minor position in comparison with the teaching of structures. Finally, the learner has to know the “rules of use” which guarantee an appropriate use of the language code. Not much attention was paid to this area. Whereas language teaching in the past has considered the first two, it has neglected the third.

Structure Versus Function

There is a shift of emphasis currently taking place in linguistics; it is a shift away from the study of language seen purely as a system towards the study of language use and function. An argument which is fairly common in linguistics and which has been around for some time is that genuine understanding of linguistic structure is not possible without a detailed consideration of function. In line with this, some linguists appeared who called for the study of language function along with its structure.

For the purpose of illustrating this shift, it is necessary to discuss the views held by Hymes and Halliday and others.

Hymes makes it clear that for learners to communicate effectively they must know the social meaning of the linguistic forms - a knowledge of the language system alone would be inadequate to ensure effective interaction. He argues that “communicative competence include not only the linguistic forms of a language but also a knowledge of when, how and to

whom it is appropriate to use these forms.” (Paulston 1976: 56).

Hymes levels a criticism against contemporary linguistics, “A major characteristic of modern linguistics has been that it takes structure as a primary end in itself, and tends to depreciate use, while not relinquishing any of its claims to the great significance that is attached to language.” (Brumfit 1979: 8).

Halliday (1973: 22) is interested in investigating whether the character of language has been shaped and determined by what we use it for. His main concern is the interrelationship between language function and language structure and has postulated three functions - the ideational, interpersonal and textual - to correspond to three levels or strata of grammatical analysis.

Halliday characterizes the use of language by children and adults. For the child, language has many functions, one of which is to inform, but for the adults this function is generalized to all uses of language, “For the child, the use of language to inform is just one instance of language use, one function among many. But with the adult, the ideational element in language is present in all its uses; no matter what he is doing with language, he will find himself exploiting its ideational resources.” (1973: 37).

We also use language interpersonally for interacting with other people, controlling their behavior, and expressing our own attitudes and feelings. “The interpersonal function embodies all use of language to express social relations, including all forms of the speaker’s intrusion into the speech situation and the speech act.” (Halliday 1973: 41).

There is also the textual function, which fills the requirement that language should be operationally relevant - that it should have a texture, in real contexts of situation, that distinguishes a living message from a mere entry in a grammar or a dictionary.” (Halliday 1973: 42).

Halliday is also concerned with the variety of structural signs usually used to carry out a certain function. He considers how we might perform a certain function, “scolding a naughty child” for instance. He imagines a child who has come with an object stolen from a building site. The mother disapproves of his behavior and warns him not to do it again. The following are some of the utterances she might make on this occasion:

1. You’re very naughty.
 2. I’ll smack you if you do that again.
 3. I don’t like you to do that.
 4. That thing doesn’t belong to you.
 5. Daddy would be very cross.
 6. You make mummy very unhappy by doing that.
 7. That’s not allowed.
-

According to Halliday these sentences can be classified according to the **type of control used** or the **orientation of sentences**. In line with the former classification we notice in (1) for instance the mother tries to control the child's behavior by expressing disapproval. In the second sentence, a threat is used, and the third exhibits a notion of an appeal. In the fourth sentence the mother indicates that the child is breaking the "rules of society".

This is the first step in Halliday's analysis. He goes on to specify how each type of control is expressed linguistically. He notes, for example, that a threat is "likely to be realised as a transitive clause of action with "you" as Goal, and with a verb of a particular sub-class as Process, in simple future tense." (Halliday 1973: 74).

The other classification Halliday discusses stems from the orientation of sentences. In sentence (4) reference is made to the object the child has taken; the sentence is said to be "oriented" towards the object. Sentences (1), (5) and (6) are "oriented" towards the child, the father and the mother respectively. The "orientation" of each sentence affects its structural form. His analysis results in a "semantic network" which specifies the linguistic means used to perform the function of "scolding a child".

The centrality of "structure" as a means to describe and analyze language was also challenged by psycholinguists (e.g. Campbell and Wales 1970) who argued that in studying language acquisition by children, structure and function must be taken into account. It is now believed that description of language is a matter of accurately recording not only the form of a child's utterances, but also the context in which they are made and the meanings of the constituent words.

How did the shift of focus from "structure" to "function" in linguistics affect foreign language learning? In response we should mention the following.

First, the sentence was no longer accepted as a basic unit in language teaching and was therefore rejected in favor of the use of sentences in combination. Such use, usually referred to as "discourse" was given due attention by both materials writers and teachers.

Second, semantically based syllabuses emerged, which took functions, settings, and notions as basic units of organization. These syllabuses were written with the functional needs of language learners in mind.

Syllabus Types

The view of language is only one of at least five major concerns in textbook writing. But the language component is so fundamental that it deserves most attention.

There exist many types of syllabus and some of which are structural, situational and semantic. In this paper we are mainly concerned with structural and semantic syllabuses because they constitute fundamentally contrastive views or approaches to textbook writing.

Structural Syllabuses

The unit of organization in such syllabuses is the structure, which has long been adopted by syllabus designers. A characteristic of numerous foreign language teaching approaches - the grammar - translation, audio-lingual, and cognitive code-learning theory, to name only a few, is the adoption of structures as a means to teach the language. Language structures are taught without overlooking the "gradation" principle whereby units covering simpler structures are placed before those covering more complex ones. This principle would, of course, motivate the students and reduce the level of tension and frustration at the same time.

Structural syllabuses can be criticized on several grounds. First, they tend to consider structures as being of equal importance and students should therefore spend the same amount of time learning individual structures. The fact of the matter is that there exist two types of structures, high and low frequency structures and more time must be devoted to the former due to their higher frequency of occurrence. The criterion of the complexity (2) of structure must be put aside in favor of the frequency of occurrence criterion (3). In the past, more time was given to teaching and explaining complex structures than simpler structures regardless of their frequency of use. This, I think, is a valid point and should be seriously considered by structural syllabus writers. Thus, the amount of time spent on teaching a given structure must be proportionate to its frequency of occurrence.

Second, as indicated by Wilkins, "it is very difficult for many learners to appreciate the applicability of the knowledge they gain through a structural syllabus. The process of being taken systematically through the grammatical system often reduces the motivation of those who need to see some practical return for their learning." (Brumfit 1979: 82).

Third, There is the danger that the learning of grammar will be identified with the learning of grammatical forms to the exclusion of grammatical meaning. This can best be illustrated in relation with the terms "vacuous grammaticality", and "meaningful grammaticality". In the former, rules of grammar are taught for their own sake; that is they are taught as an end, not as a means to an end; in the latter a further step is made which warrants using structures for self-expression and communication.

Fourth, there is the most recent criticism that the bringing together of

grammatically homogeneous sentences, exhibiting a certain language structure is highly artificial, since in real life situations, it is sentences which are alike in meaning that occur together and not those that are alike in structures. This is admittedly true of structural syllabuses, but again something similar to this occurs in functional syllabuses where a set of sentences exhibiting different structures are amassed in the same unit. This will inevitably result in confusing students due to abrupt and unsystematized introduction to these structures which have nothing in common except that they express a certain function.

Another argument which is raised in relation to the inefficiency of structural syllabuses lies in the fact that there is no one-to-one correspondence between language structures and functions. "For instance, the assumptions that all imperatives are orders, and all orders are imperatives is totally misleading because imperatives sometimes fulfill other functions: offering, invitation and pleading." (Johnson 1982: 23). A counter argument is that such structures are few in the language and most all structures stand in a one-to-one correspondence with their functions. Teachers can also focus more on "anomalous" structures and pinpoint the diverse functions associated with them. After all, it is the teacher's responsibility to teach and teaching is not always unequivocal, straightforward or crystal-clear.

In spite of some criticisms levelled against the structural syllabus, it remains in essence the best working model available up till now because of the following. First it is the only syllabus whose basic unit of organization (structure) was clearly defined by linguists. Second, structures lend themselves to categorization in terms of simplicity, complexity, frequency, etc. Functions and notions fall short of such categorization. Thus syllabus writers will end up writing teaching units in a haphazard manner since no adequate information is available on their function, their simplicity and complexity.

A few shortcomings associated with the structural syllabus do not necessarily render it useless or inoperable. There is no justification for totally or partially replacing it by other syllabus types. The strategy must be a continued use of the structural syllabus but with carrying out some modifications necessary for improving it.

Semantic Syllabuses

Semantic syllabuses are defined as syllabuses which, in contrast to structural syllabuses, use "notions" and "functions" as their starting point. We are using the term semantic syllabuses in the same way Wilkins uses the term "notional syllabuses" which are based on an inventory which lists both functions and semantico-grammatical items. (See Brumfit et al 1979: 86).

The structural syllabus answers the question 'how?'. How do learners of language X gain proficiency? There is, however, a more fundamental question to be asked, the answer to which may provide an alternative to structural organization of language teaching. The question is 'what?'. What are the language functions that the learner needs to express in the foreign language? In response, we may for instance suggest greeting, inviting, persuading, expressing sympathy, expressing disapproval and others. These functions constitute of course uses to which the language may be put.

The semantic demands of learners determine the linguistic content of this type of syllabus. This implies that teaching is focused around some functions that learners find urgently necessary to express. While the structural syllabus designer has no problems selecting from an inventory of language structures originally provided by the linguist, the communicative syllabus designer has no such resource to fall back on.

According to Johnson, "there is no ready-made description of language use, expressed in a precise and well-formulated terminology." (1982: 34). This is a claim that can be easily refuted in light of the comprehensive model for language use originally developed by Munby (1978) and in light of Levinson's (1983) theory of language use.

Munby provides a complex model for communicative competence to account for language use; this model comprises several components; communication needs processor, profile of needs, language skills selector, meaning processor, and linguistic encoder.

We will restrict ourselves here to the discussion of the components: communication needs processor and meaning processor due to their immediate relevance to language use. According to Munby the former component consists of two kinds of parameters: those that process non-linguistic data and are termed (*a priori*), and those that provide the data and are termed (*a posteriori*). The *a priori* parameters are: purposive domain, setting, interaction, and instrumentality. The *a posteriori* parameters are: dialect, target level, communicative event and communicative key. Constraints on the *a posteriori* parameters depend upon input from another set of constraints on the *a priori* parameters. (for further discussion of these parameters, see (Munby 1978: 32-40).

In the meaning processor component, parts of the profile of communication needs are converted into semantic subcategories of a predominantly pragmatic kind. "Here one must consider the kind of semantic unit that needs to be handled and the nature of the conversion, and the argument for such processing in the first place." (Munby 1978: 42).

Levinson (1983) is interested in setting up a theory for language use by

appealing to three aspects of pragmatic organization, namely: deixis, presupposition and implicature. "Aspects of deixis show that unmarked usages of grammatical encodings of temporal, spatial, social, and discourse parameters are organized around and assumption of co-present conversational participants. "(Levinson 1983: 284). In presupposition, constraints are placed on the way in which information has to be presented if it is to be introduced to particular participants with specific shared assumptions and knowledge about the world. Finally, implicatures derive from specific assumptions about conversational contexts.

Levinson believes that the best way to study conversational usage is through empirical techniques and suggests the possibility that empirical kinds of investigation of language use will replace the largely philosophical traditions that have given rise to pragmatics.

Bierwisch argues for the extension of the domain of meaning to allow for a semantic interpretation of a word or sentence in accordance with not only the linguistic but also the extra-linguistic context in which it occurs. A sentence that is ambiguous when taken out of context might have only one interpretation if it occurs in a particular universe of discourse. Hence Bierwisch expects a semantic theory to explain how one of the several meanings associated with a given word or sentence is selected to optimally fit a particular universe of discourse. "We might know, for example, that group has one meaning when used in mathematical textbooks, another in sociological studies and still another in everyday discourses." (Lyons 1970b: 184).

Wilkins opts for the use of the label "notional" syllabuses, which are made up of two types of categories. One type of category is what he calls the "category of communicative function". Wilkins gives a list of "functions" (they may be called so for short), which attempt to "itemize" the areas of language use. Some of these functions have been listed above. The second type of category is the "semantico-grammatical". It includes concepts such as: **time**, **quantity**, **space**, **matter**, **case**, **deixis**. Under **time** fall such concepts as: duration, frequency, sequence and age. For the purpose of illustrating semantico-grammatical categories, let's elaborate on the concepts of frequency and duration. The concept of duration is associated grammatically with prepositions like "for" (indicating the period of time that something has lasted), and "since" (including the period of time when something began and ended). But a concept of duration can be expressed by verb tense. "An idea of "limited duration" is often expressed by choice of the present continuous as opposed to the simple present tense." (Johnson 1982: 36). Sentences like "She is living in Amman.", "She is listening to classical music." usually give the idea that what is happening is of limited duration. "She lives in Amman.", and "She listens to classical music.", on the other

hand, suggest that the actions have gone on (and may continue) for a long time.

A crucial question is raised here whether there is any difference between "semantico-grammatical categories" and the categories of communicative function. Indeed, there is. Whereas the former categories provide a means of categorizing "signification", the latter are actually items of use.

Semantic Syllabus Design

The "semantic" syllabus designer is faced with a problem that the traditional syllabus designer did not have to tackle. Whereas the traditional syllabus designer started with "structures" which are well-defined items, and later proceeded to grade them in a way that would warrant progression from simple to more complex ones, the "semantic" syllabus designer is faced with a set of alternatives to choose from. His unit of organization can be any of these: functions, notions or settings.

If functions are taken as a unit of organization, where teaching units cover functional areas (introducing, inviting, requesting information, for example) then a functional syllabus is produced. Another possibility holds whereby a syllabus designer may arrange the syllabus so that each unit covers a setting (shop, hotel, airport, restaurant, etc.). The result is a setting-based syllabus. Similarly, he could focus on notions such as frequency, duration, dimension, location, etc. and produce a notional syllabus. Whatever the unit of organization in a semantic syllabus is, the designer cannot afford to overlook notions, topics, settings, roles, etc. if a functional syllabus is produced then it merely indicates that function is adopted as the basic unit of organization.

Semantic syllabuses can therefore be oriented towards a certain function, notion or setting. For the purpose of discussion, let's imagine that we have an inventory of nine items-three functions, three notions, three settings. An inventory of a real syllabus will of course be far more complex as it contains a large number of items. Following are the items which are taken from Van EK (1975).

Functions

Requesting Information.

Giving Information.

Enquiring how certain/uncertain something is.

Settings

Hotel.

Station.

Shop.

Notions

Availability/Non-availability.

Location.

Cost.

There are many ways to teach each item. one possibility is to write three lessons each dealing with one function, the first would teach requesting information, the second giving information and the third inquiring how certain/uncertain something is. These lessons will include sentences for practice that are common to the settings of hotel, station or shop. The sentences will involve notions of availability/non-availability, location and cost. Here are nine sentences which can be introduced in the first lesson called, "Requesting Information." The relevant settings and notions are given in brackets. These sentences are taken from Johnson (1982: 57).

1. I'd like to know whether you have any single room for tonight. (hotel; availability/non-availability)
2. Could you tell me whether there are any seats free for the 10: 30 to Dover? (station; availability/non-availability)
3. Could you tell me whether you have any size 11 shoes in stock? (shop; availability/non-availability)
4. Could you tell me where the dining room is, please? (hotel; location)
5. Could you tell me where the ticket office is, please? (station; location)
6. Could you tell me where the shoe department is, please? (shop; location)
7. I'd like to know how much a single room costs. (hotel; cost)
8. Could you tell me what the single fare to London is, please? (station; cost)
9. I'd like to know how much this pair costs, please. (shop; cost)

The same process can be carried out in writing lessons 2 and 3 which will be called "Giving Information" and "Enquiring how certain/uncertain something is". Again these lessons will involve the notions (availability/non-availability, location and cost) and the settings (hotel, shop and station).

The three lessons will therefore introduce language relevant to all functions, settings and notions, but the basic unit of organization remains the function.

Settings rather than functions can be taken as a unit of organization. In this way a setting-based syllabus is produced. The first lesson may then be called, "At the Hotel", the second, "At the Station" and the third, "In a Shop". Again, in a setting-based syllabus other functions and notions are not ignored, nor must they be ignored by a semantic syllabus designer. Lesson 1 would deal with requesting and giving information,

enquiring about certainty/uncertainty in a hotel setting. The different functions revolve around matters such as the availability of hotel rooms, their location and cost.

We can also design lessons "oriented" towards notions and the basic unit of organization will be notion rather than function or setting. Syllabus writers will then make sure to incorporate functions and settings the same way notions and functions were incorporated in a setting-based syllabus.

The criteria for selecting one semantic syllabus type over another have not been well-established, therefore, choosing the proper syllabus type for the right person is still a controversial issue which needs further investigation. They perhaps explain why some textbook writers do not adopt the same unit of organization throughout the whole book, but rather opt for "different items as units of organization". In line with this, some lessons will be based on settings, others on notions and others more on functions. The outcome will be a textbook with lessons which are not identical in terms of units of organization, but rather multi-dimensional.

Conclusion

It does not seem that a functional approach to syllabus writing will prove a worthy endeavor especially in the lower levels of Jordanian schools. This may be attributed to many reasons:

First, it seems that the "semantic" syllabuses are more suitable for countries where English is used as a second language rather than a foreign language. When English enjoys the status of a second language, then it is used on par with the mother tongue and fulfills functions distinct from those fulfilled by the native language. English in Jordan is usually referred to as a foreign language since it has always been a school subject taught alongside other subjects. Had Jordan been a multilingual country as is India, Uganda or Nigeria, for instance, then situations would have inevitably arisen for using English or any international language for purposes of communication amongst Jordanian nationals. It is only in such a hypothetical situation that the "semantic" syllabuses will have any meaning to students who only then can use the teaching content for self-expression beyond the school bounds. There is hardly any motivation amongst the older student population of Jordan, not to mention the younger student population, to use English in domains other than the classroom. We would be surprised if the use of English were extended to other domains and we would be equally surprised if English took over the roles normally assumed by the first language. Semantic syllabuses are more fit for speech communities where English is used as a second language and where the need to use it by children is demonstrated unequivocally.

The second reason that makes us object to "semantic syllabuses" in the Jordanian context has to do with the narrow scope of such syllabuses. They may provide satisfactory frameworks for courses designed originally for special purposes, but their suitability for "general languages courses" (e.g. long duration school courses designed to cater to a variety of often only vaguely specifiable language needs) is as yet in doubt. In general language courses, students need to acquire an all-embracing knowledge which necessitates a grasp of various language components: structures, sounds, vocabulary, etc. It would be useless to talk about teaching language use and functions unless students acquired a reasonable mastery of such components. Assertions as to the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of structural syllabuses should, in the writer's opinion, be extended to "semantic syllabuses" on the following reasoning: semantic syllabuses designers criticized "structural syllabuses" on the grounds that they overlooked language use, an essential component of language learning. Similarly, semantic syllabus designers can be criticized on the grounds that they focused on language function and use to the exclusion of grammar and rules which are by no means less important than language functions.

Finally, semantic syllabuses seem to imply a degree of structural "disorganization" because a unit dealing with a certain function will inevitably present "dissimilar" sentences, which are mostly not uniform in structure. Two strategies may be adopted by the teacher to face this problem. One is to ignore these structures and not teach them to pupils, the consequence of which is imperative: pupils produce incorrect language utterances which will distort the intended meaning. Another strategy is to teach these structures, thereby shifting the orientation of syllabuses from the study of functions, settings to the study of structures. Such a shift of orientation will of course result in a structural syllabus. By not teaching a language system in lower stages, we are doing the pupils a disservice: they won't be able to speak grammatically correctly nor will they convey their meaning or message distinctly in later stages. After all, ignoring language use within "structural syllabuses" is a temporary problem that, if taken care of from the very beginning, can correct itself in time.

As known, syllabus design affects the future language teaching in Jordan and a premature shift from structural to semantic syllabuses, whose validity and practicality have not yet been confirmed, may have grave consequences. The writer recommends, therefore, a reconsideration of the structural syllabus, not for the purpose of replacing it but rather modifying it in such a way as to allow for further emphasis on language not only as a system of rules but also a system through which function can be expressed.

To conclude, I personally applaud innovations and I am not less enthusiastic about new "fads", but at the same time I believe it is wise to

look carefully before jumping onto the newest bandwagon coming to town.

Notes

1. "I am, frankly, rather skeptical about the significance, for the teaching of languages, of such insights and understanding as have been attained in linguistics and psychology." (N. Chomsky, *Linguistic Theory*, Northeast Conference on Research and Language Learning, 1966).
2. For example, Michalek (1984: 30) makes it clear that the present perfect tense is one of the most difficult for learners whose native language makes no distinction between perfect and past tenses.
3. In the same manner we would also argue that the future perfect tense is used less frequently than the simple past or present perfect tense.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bierwisch, Manfred. "Semantics", in John Lyons (Ed). **New Horizons in Linguistics**. Penguin Books, 1970.
- Brumfit, C. and k., Johnson. Eds. **The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching**. Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Campbell, R. and R. Wales. "The Study of Language Acquisition", in John Lyons (Ed.) **New Horizons in Linguistics**. Penguin Books, 1970.
- Chastain, Kenneth. **Developing Second Language Skills: Theory to Practice**. Rand McNally Publishing Company, 1976.
- Chomsky, Noam, **Syntactic Structures**. The Hague: Mouton, 1957.
- Chomsky, Noam. **Aspects of the Theory of Syntax**. Cambridge: Mas: M.I.T. Press, 1965.
- Girard, Denis. **Linguistics and Foreign Language Teaching**. Longman, 1972.
- Halliday, M.A.K. **Explorations in the Functions of Language**. London: Edward Arnold, 1973.
- Haugen, Einar. **The Norwegian Language in America**, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1953.
- Johnson, Keith. **Communicative Syllabus Design and Methodology**. London: Pergamon Press, 1982.
- Lado, R. **Linguistics Across Cultures**. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1957.
- Levinson, Stephen. **Pragmatics**. London: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Lyons, John. **Chomsky**. Fontana: Collins, 1970a.
- Lyons, John. (Ed.) **New Horizons in Linguistics**. Penguin Books, 1970b.
- Michalek, Ewa. "Tense Diagrams". **Forum**, 1984. vol.XXII, No. 1
- Munby, John. **Communicative Syllabus Design**. London: Cambridge University Press. 1978.
- Paulston, C. and M. Bruder. **Teaching English as a Second Language**. Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1976.
- Skinner, B.F. **Verbal Behavior**. New York: Appleton-Century Crofts 1957.
- Van EK, J.A. **The Threshold Level**. London: Pergamon Press. 1973.
- Weinreich, U. **Languages in Contact**. The Hague: Mouton, 1953.
- Wilkins, D.A. "Grammatical, Situational and National Syllabuses" in C. Brumfit and K. Johnson. (Eds.) **The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching**. London: Oxford University Press, 1979.