



Creating Templates for Noticing Grammatical Systems

Subramaniam Govindasamy

International Islamic University (Malaysia)

subragov@iium.edu.my

Introduction

Even though ESL learners are exposed to grammatical structures, they often fail to acquire them, i.e., input has yet to become intake. The degree of attention focused on the material can be an important factor that determines whether or not targeted items become intake (Doughty 2001). Noticing is at two levels of awareness, the first being a surface level phenomenon; the next being awareness at the level of understanding, a deeper level of processing involving pattern recognition and rule recognition. The latter is characterized by a language user's skills to analyse and test a hypothesis based on a set of language data. If this is to be achieved, instructors must draw students' selective attention to meaning and form, a process that helps utilize students' limited attentional capacity to the maximum during the investigation. Enhanced texts can be used and learners are able to notice the targeted forms needing little meta-linguistic explanation (Gascoigne 2006). Textual enhancement (TE), as it is called, can be achieved through typographical alterations such as bold facing, underlining, enlarging, capitalizing, italicizing or colour coding (Gascoigne 2006). Gascoigne, however, does not mention the use of templates as a TE mechanism (refer to the data analysis section below to see how templates are used in this study). This input enhancement technique can be effective if combined with a perception that language is a system of systems (see following section on theoretical framework).

Aim of the study

This study has a two-fold aim. The first is to demonstrate that use of templates as a quantitative technique enhances deeper noticing of linguistic features embedded in texts while learners are committed to encoding the data. Second, larger scale analyses through the use of template-based data help learners to see patterns in the linguistic system; this interplay of patterns is unavailable if idealized language inputs or limited data are scrutinized.

Research design

Ten students were selected to analyse verb functions. After some initial exposure to functional analysis using templates, they were given some training and subsequently they had to complete the task independently. If they are able to complete the exercise, it can be assumed that they have a deeper understanding of the linguistic system – the event system.

The analyses were carried out based on the Columbia School of Linguistics (CSL) framework. The CSL framework premises on three aspects of analysis: first, observing a set of language data; second, forming hypotheses of the functions of the set of data and, finally, testing them. How the event system is investigated is explained in the section titled Data Analysis: Using the templates. The most pertinent part of the study concerns how the individual work of the students were tabulated and descriptive statistics applied to obtain a larger perspective of the system. This is explained in the section titled Data Analysis: Investigating Cumulative Verb Functions.

Data Analysis: Using templates

CSL advocates the principle of investigating language as a system of systems. A language is divided into layers of systems helping one another to make messages more precise. Precision in messages has to be the outcome and it is firmly believed that language users employ a range of skills and linguistic knowledge to achieve this precision. However, this creative use of language is a daunting task for novice language users because at the sign (langue) level, meaning is vague. When a language is seen from a systems point of view, the task of learning and using the signs appropriately is overwhelming. That there are separate rules of use of individual signs, especially grammatical signs, makes use even more complicated. If these rules of use are systematically encapsulated into systems and the workings of each system are investigated independently, learning can be made more efficient. With this in mind, the



researcher, based on his 20 years of experience in deciphering the main English systems, developed an approach to investigate the event system in English. An event is the “happening” in an utterance. In written language, it is called the verb. All the functions related to the event are its satellite. Investigations so far point to five functions that are events- related: factuality, immediacy, control, person, and number.

Factuality: The event has to make claims about how linguistically factual it is. The claims of factuality can be high most often but they do signal low factuality. In an utterance, the assumption underlying the use of verbs such as *does*, *sings*, *is* and so on is that the event is true (high factual, i.e. there is a 100% chance that the event is really taking place. Similarly, the inflections *-ing*, *-ed* also denote that the event is a linguistic reality. Conversely, when *-s* is not used, there are two possibilities – one, the subject could be plural or the subject characterizes first/second person; on the other hand, the said event could be an hypothetical one or an event that is nearing completion but has yet to reach 100% fulfillment. The latter contexts demand a zero verb (e.g. *proceedø*, *runø*, *absorbø*, and so on). These latter events are characterized as being LOW factuality events.

Immediacy: The event also has to make claims about how immediate it is to the moment of speaking. The nonpast events are usually high in immediacy to the moment of speaking; hence they are considered high immediacy signals. When the events are in the past, the grammatical sign *-ed* is added to denote, that is, signal low immediacy.

Control: The event has to make claims about whether or not the entity/subject/doer preceding it has high control over the event. When the doer is an active participant in the event, this is signaled by an active verb (as in *President Obama suggests...*). Conversely, when a doer is more thematic/ symbolic (as in *he was captured...* the capturing was carried out by some agents, the doer is actually the victim of the circumstances), the passive form (*be + Ven*, as in *is done*, *been taken*, *was proven*, etc) is deployed suggesting the non active status of the doer.

Person: The event has also to make claims about whether or not the entity/subject/doer preceding it is in the first person, second or third. English is marked for person and this is signaled by verb inflections: first and second person are accorded greater attention with the zero signal (usually paired with plural entities). The third person verbs are accompanied by the *-s* inflection if the doer is singular, the time indicated is nonpast and when the factuality is high.

Number: The event has a final claim: about whether or not the entity/subject/doer preceding the verb is ONE or MORE THAN ONE. If the number is one, signal/ inflection *-s* is deployed along with the verb fulfilling the subject-verb agreement requirement (e.g. *Mr Romney is fond*). The zero signal is deployed to indicate the MORE THAN ONE message (e.g. *how jobs are created*). Some verbs do not show ONE or MORE THAN ONE messages and are categorized as ambiguous (e.g. *the election will revolve not around fairness*). In this example, the zero verb used (*will revolve*) preceding the ONE entity (the election) goes against this SVA rule. Grammarians have claimed that this is an exception, an argument that goes against logical deduction. This argument is taken up after the analysis consisting of ten articles from *The Economist* is completed.

Data Analysis: Investigating Cumulative Verb Function

In this section, the analyses carried out by learners are presented. Based on the templates created by the researcher who also incorporated texts from ten journalistic articles from the Economist into the templates, ESL students in my semiotics class toiled to indicate against every clause entry in the left column the linguistic messages the verbs are denoting in the columns on the right. When they have completed this task, class discussion ensues as to whether or not the function messages were correctly identified. The tallies were tabulated and descriptive statistics used to determine the relational value of each of the verb functions.

Using the template to study the interplay of verb functions and the messages they convey is learning in itself. But scrutinizing the verb functions over a larger scale reveals patterns that cannot be captured when analysis is restricted to smaller number of entries (See Table 1).

Table 6: Template showing distribution of Factuality, Immediacy, Control, Person and Number

Texts	Factuality		Immediacy		Control		Person			Number		
	high	low	high	Low	high	low	1	2	3	one	>one	amb
Obsessions; Mar2 2013 (n=65)	55	10	29	33	3	47	16	-	-	65	21	4
Don't worry; Mar 19 2011 (116)	85	31	36	49	31	98	18	-	-	116	14	12



Total + data from 8 other texts	788	229	516	332	179	833	182	31	27	959	318	193
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What can be deduced is that some functions have little or no ambiguity (abbreviated: amb) markers while in some others, ambiguities appear to proliferate. In the Factuality column, the distribution is between HIGH (n =788, 78.7%) and LOW (n=229, 21.3%) and there are absolutely no ambiguous markers. Similarly, Control (HIGH n = 833, 82.1%; LOW n =182, 17.9%) and Person (First n =31, 3.0%; Second n = 27, 2.7%; Third n = 959, 94.3%) also do not show any ambiguity markers. Immediacy and Number do show some level of incongruity. For the function of Immediacy, 12.6% (n = 179) of the total occurrence show ambiguity markers. A closer scrutiny shows that it is related to either LOW Factuality or FIRST and SECOND Person use of verbs. Since the numbers for FIRST and SECOND Person use is limited, it can be assumed that LOW Factuality has an effect on Immediacy signals. Similarly, for the function of Number, 45.4% (n = 425) of the signals show ambiguity. In other words, more than 45% of the data does not support number agreement. This set of data with a huge number of ambiguities is prioritized to show something more important than number agreement. LOW Factuality, LOW immediacy and to some extent FIRST and SECOND Person messages appear to be more important than Number messages. This is a revelation and this unique behavior in the interplay of verb functions is only captured when the data scrutinized is fairly large.

Conclusion

Two notions were tested in this study – the first being whether or not template-based technique does impact deeper understanding of linguistic inputs. Second, the technique helps learners to larger patterns in language systems. The fact that learners were able to effectively complete the analysis task after the initial training shows that they were noticing the data with much success.

It is apparent that a large set of data captured through the use of templates designed to study verb functions do show the parole characteristics of a language. Studying individual features do not provide this dynamic organization of language that has been created to present coherent textual message, all the time prioritizing the signaling of features that is more important in presenting a set of coherent, precision-based messages. This study is promising in that it has shown that large-scale studies can be carried out scientifically using templates; and studying an entire system with its network of functions provides clues to priorities and eclipsing of functions within the system.

References

- [1] Doughty, C. (2001). The cognitive underpinnings of focus on form. In P. Robinson (Ed.), *Cognition and second language instruction* (pp. 206-257). Cambridge: CUP.
- [2] Gascoigne, C. (2006). Explicit Input Enhancement: Effects on Target and Non-Target Aspects of Second Language Acquisition. *Foreign Language Annals*, 39(4), 551-564.