

Functionalist and cognitive approaches in teaching and describing languages: their advantages and disadvantages for less spoken languages

Paolo Driussi
Udine University

In my speech I would like make some considerations on some different points concerning less spoken languages and their teaching.

– The terms “small language” or “less spoken language” do not refer to linguistic concepts but rather to economic and cultural politics. We must understand this point in order to accept what it is possible to do at universities.

– Today we live in a world where changes are very quick, and where language contacts are numerous. Moreover, the approaches to study languages are also changing in a challenging way.

It has been quite a few years since scholars like Cook have demonstrated that the more traditional way of teaching languages to which we were used has changed and is changing, for example whenever we have to meet the needs of new immigrants.

– Cognitivism and functionalism are powerful linguistic theories; however, they are still theories only. At their best we can admit that they are part of wider theories covering more than one research field. They can't give the sole answer to major needs outside research. Still they can be an important help in understanding new tasks and developing new approaches to language and language teaching.

– Less spoken languages must help us recognize that from linguistic points of view there is no hierarchical difference between languages as communicative instruments. On the other hand, researches on less spoken languages must account for structures that we don't necessarily find in major languages. Since traditional grammars are latin-based and generativism is English-based, we need a new, different approach in order to understand, explain and teach these politically less powerful languages at their best.

– Cognitivism and functionalism are very different from each other and can be used complementarily. Cognitivism seems to always require mental reconstructions, while functionalism is closer to structuralism and allows for applications that are more mechanical.

– If we take the newer models of students of a language (cfr. Cook 2002), those who need it but are not interested in it, then maybe functionalism, especially in those forms that are closer to typology, can offer valid patterns for teaching and learning. But it can't be used as it is in the forms of theoretical research.

– For this reason we need to educate teachers who can adapt theories to the most efficient didactics. This can only be done at universities.

– Dealing with less spoken languages must not be an imitation of major cultures, but carried on through the specifications and acceptance of its own character. We must teach how to work with not dominant languages and cultures so that through the attention on differences students can radically improve their attention to all differences concerning not only a second language but their mother tongue as well.

– In my experience on Hungarian I have seen this in many different aspects, from phonology to syntax (cfr. also Driussi 2012). At starting levels I find that functionalism (I follow the Holland-based Functional Discourse Grammar, Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2008) can be very effective. This is true regarding especially the

possibility of overcoming difficulties in both the terminology and the analysis of more traditional approaches. On the other hand, cognitivism can help later in understanding the strategies of the language.

– My point is that we must have the courage to handle these new powerful instruments in new ways without adapting them to more traditional patterns of thinking. This can only be done at universities, this can be done better through research, teaching, learning less spoken languages rather than dominant ones.

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