Going 'Virtual': A Blended-Learning Course in English Morphology

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Abstract

The paper presents the design of a course of English morphology taught in a blended-learning environment. English morphology is a traditional core linguistic discipline which forms a standard component English philological programmes curricula. Vis-à-vis the recent technological development, instructors need to revisit traditional methods of its teaching, question their efficacy and, accordingly, consider the affordances of the newly-emerging 'virtual classroom'. The proposed course offers a systemic-functional perspective of language which approaches grammar as a repository of expressive resources employed by language users to fulfil their communicative goals. This less commonly practiced approach invites students to explore the system of language while using up-to-date authentic illustrative data which cover important segments of social life. In doing so, students acquire a powerful tool for analysis and evaluation of different uses of language, which makes them empowered, competent and critical language users.

Vyučovanie anglickej morfológie formou blended-learningu

Príspevok predkladá návrh kurzu anglickej morfológie určený pre umiestnenie do blended-learningového prostredia. Morfológia angličtiny je tradičnou jazykovednou disciplínou ponúkanou na filologickom štúdiu angličtiny. V reakcii na súčasný technologický vývoj učitelia sú vyzvaní zrevidovať efektívnosť tradičných prístupov vyučovania a zvážiť novootvorené možnosti „virtuálnej učebne". Navrhovaný kurz je postavený na funkčno-semiotickom modeli jazyka, ktorý pokladá gramatiku za inventár výrazových prostriedkov na splnenie komunikačných cieľov používateľov jazyka. Tento prístup ponúka študentovi nielen možnosť zvládnutia systému jazyka na základe súčasného rečového materiálu pokrývajúceho relevantné oblasti spoločenského života, ale aj nástroj na analýzu a kritickú evalváciu použití jazyka.

Kurs der englischen Morphologie mittels Blended Learning

Dieser Beitrag präsentiert den Entwurf eines Kurses über englische Morphologie als Bestandteil des Blended Learning. Die englische Morphologie ist eine traditionelle sprachwissenschaftliche Disziplin, die im Rahmen des Studiums der englischen Philologie angeboten wird. Als Reaktion auf die derzeitige technische Entwicklung sind die Lehrer gehalten, die Effektivität der traditionellen Unterrichtsansätze zu revidieren und neue Möglichkeiten des „virtuellen Hörsaals" in Betracht zu ziehen. Der neu erstellte Kurs basiert auf dem funktional-semiotischen Sprachmodell, das die Grammatik als Inventar der Ausdrucksmittel zur Erfüllung der kommunikativen Ziele des Sprachbenutzers betrachtet. Dieser Ansatz bietet den Studenten die Möglichkeit, das Sprachsystem auf Grundlage von

Sprachmaterial zu beherrschen, das die relevanten Bereiche des gesellschaftlichen Lebens abdeckt. Dieser Ansatz bietet aber gleichzeitig auch ein Werkzeug zur Analyse und zur kritischen Evaluation des Sprachgebrauchs.

Introduction

English morphology as an academic course forms a standard part of English study programmes at Slovak universities. Most typically it is conceived within the framework of a well-established, traditional structuralist paradigm, with all its strengths and weaknesses. It offers a thorough description of the structural layout of English language, defines and describes all its organizational levels and their units of analysis. English grammatical system is presented as an autonomous entity devoid of its users and uses. Although it is presented as essential part of linguistic competence, its connections to other components within the overall communicative competence are largely overlooked. The limits of the traditional approach which sees grammar as a list of structures and rules for their formation are visible when we consider the challenges of the contemporary world which welcomes competent multilingual users who are able to draw on the resources offered by their linguistic repertoires in which English has acquired a firm place. It is my belief that in the globalized world users of English face pressures which cannot be responded to by the traditional paradigms of English language teaching and learning. As an attempt to respond to these challenges, the presented course of English morphology adopts a systemic-functional approach which I find advantageous in its capacity to account for the processes of meaning making in which English is involved. In line with thus proposed alternative approach I claim that language use brings together participants with their communicative goals which are played out in concrete socio-cultural contexts. I approach grammar as an inventory of resources which language users deploy, along with other semiotic systems, in the processes of making meaning.

When compared with the standard form-function continuum in the study of language, the systemic-functional grammar makes one step further, and studies texts as discourses in the multimodal real-world environment (Table 1).

Tab. 1: *Traditional and functional approaches to grammar*

	type of grammar		
	traditional	functional	
		communicative	**systemic-functional**
perspective on language use	syntagmatic		**syntagmatic and paradigmatic**
highest level of analysis	sentence	**text/discourse**	
type of language studied	written	written, spoken, **multimodal**	
attention to context	none or minimum	greater	maximum: meaning-making in **real-world** specimens of concrete genres, **register**

1   The systemic-functional grammar: a brief overview

The systemic-functional grammar (SFG) has been developed and elaborated by Michael Halliday (1978) within a broader theory of language called systemic-functional linguistics. At present a particularly influential avenue of functional linguistics approaches language as a system of choices for making meaning. While its systemic component stresses the sets of options available to language users, the functional component is based on the conviction that language structures are given shape by the functions to which language is put. In this way, SFG prioritizes Saussurean 'paradigmatic' axis, although not at the expense of the 'syntagmatic' axis which is favoured by the traditional approaches to grammar. SFG sees language as an instrument in service of three macro-functions, which are the *experiential*

(*representational* or *ideational*) function, which presents language users' construal of the world, the *interpersonal* function, which users employ to interact with their social environment, and the *textual* function, which is used to organize a message in order to make sense. In the perspective of SFG, rather than as a mere list of (syntagmatic) structures language is seen as a system of paradigmatic choices drawn by language users from the pool of options available to them in their linguistic repertoires. The contextual dependency of these choices is systematically examined within *register analysis* and its three mutually entwined dimensions: *field*, *tenor* and *mode*:

Field denotes the type of social activity performed, its topic and the degree of specialisation it requires, the perspective/angle of representation including the participants' placement in the transitivity structures of the clause.

Tenor denotes the social roles which the participants adopt and how they are mutually aligned, their relative social status/power (age, function, expertise) relationships and social distance (familiarity vs. distance).

Mode involves the medium and the channel used, degree of interactivity and spontaneity, relation of language use to the immediate situation and the presence of other semiotic systems.

SFG presents the three areas of register as both mutually overlapping (Table 2) and as systematically corresponding to the three above-mentioned macro-functions of language.

Tab. 2: *Register as a composite of tenor, field and mode*
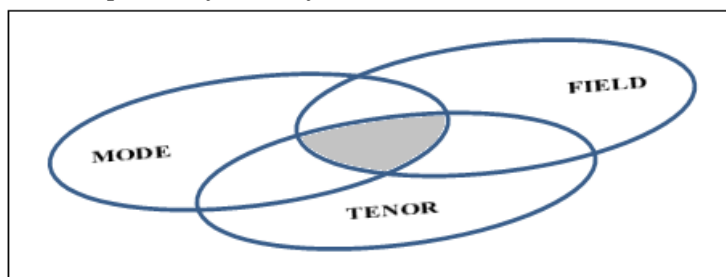
The innovative potential of SFG lies in offering itself as a tool for systematic analysis of choices which give rise to the particular patterns of the use of language and which give discourses their coherence. In addition, it lends itself to the examination of the contextually embedded uses of language within their own genres. These are standardized patterns of language practice, conventionalized and institutionalized to meet particular communicative needs within a given culture. It is the culture's values, beliefs and attitudes which form the ideological underpinnings of every use of language. Due to this capacity, SFG has become an influential tool within critically-oriented discourse analytical approaches (cf. Eggins 2004) to uncover this ideological substratum for the purpose of challenging or resisting the prevailing ideologies.

2   Methodological considerations

The objective of the present SFG-based course is that students, in addition to the deepening their knowledge of English grammar, develop their ability to use grammar both as a tool for critical assessment of the instances of others' and their own uses of language, as well as an instrument which would enable them to meet their own communicative needs. The course's overall goal is thus to contribute to the development of both competent and critical language user. The technological-methodological environment into which the course has been placed is

'blended learning', which enables to maintain the face-to-face teacher/student interaction while at the same time relegates substantial part of students´ work to the virtual environment of electronic e-scape.

To summarize the basic features of the blended-learning methodology, we present the following (cf. Ferenčík and Kostovčík 2012)

- it is a combination of online and face-to-face interaction (cf. Rooney 2003, Osguthorpe & Graham 2003).

- the reasons to adopt blended learning methodology may be (1) pedagogical richness, (2) access to knowledge, (3) social interaction, (4) personal agency, (5) cost-effectiveness, and (6) ease of revision (Osguthorpe & Graham 2003). These may be complemented with the benefit of overcoming temporal and spatial restrictions connected with the traditional classroom learning.

- it reinstates the social dimension downplayed by the electronically-supported learning in its pure form (e-learning); it offers a mixed environment in which learners find themselves in personalized classroom interaction as well as in computer-mediated learning interaction

- it enables the mixing of synchronous and asynchronous learning; the latter enables the learners to flexibly manage their time, return to the study materials and revise them

- it redefines the role of the teacher who becomes a mediator, guide, motivator and feedback-provider.

- it takes into account the diversity of students and their learning styles

- it enables the teacher to flexibly use physical and virtual resources

2.1   The structure of the course

Even though the practical design of the course follows the pattern of two thirteen-week series of sessions corresponding to two semesters of the linguistic module within a credit study programme, the course-book itself treats English morphology as a single compact whole. The proposed thematic structure of the course-book is presented in Table 3, including the registers and genres which it covers. At the time when the course was conceived, it consisted of the lecture and the seminar modules (the seminar module is discussed in Ferenčík and Kostovčík 2012, Ferenčík and Krajňáková 2013).

The current model of lecture involves a classroom in which students follow the lecturer's commentary of the text projected on the screen. The lecture is a multimodal presentation of the text which students can access prior to each lecture in moodle. The topics cover the entire breadth of English noun and verb morphologies, which form the backbone of traditional formal grammatical description, and expands them by the general introduction of the relation of language and meaning, and by the final concluding remarks on how grammar functions in building up discourses. The systemic-functional perspective of grammar, i.e. how in the processes of making-meaning language users experience the world and make sense of it, is the overarching approach bridging all individual topics.

Tab. 3: *A survey of a SFG morphology course: topics, registers and genres*

	Chapter		Register	Genres
1	Language and Meaning		conversation	a film scene
2	The Structure of English		conversation	a comic strip
3	Units of Language Structure: Word		advertising	printed advertisement
4	Units of Language Structure: Phrase		advertising	printed advertisement
5	Experiencing Substantiality	The Noun Phrase		
6		Noun and Noun Categories	expository writing	electronic encyclopaedia (Wikipedia)
7		Countability		
8		Number	advertising	information leaflet
9		Determination	journalism	newspaper article
10		Case	journalism	news video
11		Gender	popular culture	music video
12		Pronouns	advertising	video advertisement
13	Experiencing Qualitativity, Circumstantiality and Relationality	Adjective, Adverb and Prepositional Phrases	commercial documentation	user´s manual
14	Experiencing Processuality	Verb and the Verb Phrase	advertising	public speech
15		Verb Classes and Verb Forms		
16		Person and Number	religion	religious service
17		Tense and Aspect	journalism	interview
18		Mood	journalism	weather forecast
19		Voice	public administration	public notice
20	Grammar in Discourse		advertising	publicity leaflet
21	Conclusion			

In line with SFG philosophy, grammar is seen as encoding four central experiential processes, viz. *substantiality*, *processuality*, *qualitativity*, and *circumstantiality*; the first two processes are presented as crucial for the construction of a message. The illustrative material in the register analysis sections which conclude each chapter is representative of a wide array of social encounters involving spoken and written uses of language (e.g. *conversation* and *Wikipedia article*), linked to the common students' experience (e.g., *iPad*, *music video*), and represents current societal issues and problems (e.g. *technological advancements*, *iPad*). Furthermore, the discourses selected are linked to particular aspects of language structure (e.g. the notion of substantiality and the *Wikipedia* article containing a high proportion of nouns), and are presented as complementing one another (for example, *iPad* is covered in three discourses/genres: expository writing, information leaflet, video advertisement and user´s manual). Underlying each chapter of the course-book is the idea that texts are constructed to convey meanings, and it is by uncovering the three layers of meaning and scrutinizing the structures involved in their construal that we can arrive at understanding the users' construals of the world.

Conclusion

The course-book English morphology is believed to offer a coherent approach to grammar employed in the meaning making processes which is innovative, contemporary and challenging. By applying a systemic-functional perspective to the analysis of contemporary language data of various registers and genres it hopes to help disclose the 'infrastructure' of language use, viz. the underlying values and beliefs that engender the given discourses. Also, the overall effectiveness of teaching/learning process is hoped to be increased by the placement of a substantial amount of activities into the electronic environment, which makes the course contemporary also in the technological sense.

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