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Synthesize/Apply/Reflect I

Modern Background:

Curzan and Adams (2009) introduce us to modern linguistic theory by writing on the topic of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure parted ways with his instruction in traditional linguistics by defining the linguistic sign. The linguistic sign is "what we might think of as a meaningful word (p. 8)." It is composed of the signifier, which is the composite of sounds that makes up the word, and the signified, which is the concept referred to by the signifier (Curzan & Adams, p. 8). These are arbitrary yet systematic. The arbitrariness stems from the fact that words are not the onomatopoetic grunts we commonly associate with our supposedly cave-dwelling ancestors; the words actually transcend any automatic association to nature, so that in one language (English), people can say "dog" as such for our best animal friend, and in another we can say "perro," which is the Spanish signifier of our quadruped, while in another there is the word "chien," which is the French representation of a the concept, i.e. the signified. This is the subject with which Saussure was concerned. Words, with their meanings, are "not . . .inherent (Curzan & Adams, 2009, p. 8)."

Furthermore, we see a systematicity in each of these commonplace human languages composed of arbitrary signifiers and specific things designated by Saussure as that which is the signified. The systematicity lies in the interrelation of the signs, defined as signifier and signified. What binds these signs together into a language? The answer is "linguistic convention (Curzan & Adams, 2009, p.8)." We have all, in effect, agreed that certain signs mean certain things and we have rules for connecting these signs into speech and thus uniting them into our common language. Saussure explained the

abstract system of signs, both lexical and grammatical, as “langue,” and he explained speech produced by the members of the speech community, in accordance with the appropriate abstract system, as “parole (Curzan & Adams, p. 9).”

One of my (anthropology) professors at the collegiate level likened the “langue” concept of Saussure to the contents of the language dictionary. Nobody knows the entire contents of the dictionary, both verbal and otherwise, but we all agree in its validity. It is one abstract representation of our language on paper. The same could be said of any language grammar book, whether prescriptive or descriptive in nature, that is, one that imposes rules or one that depicts them. This is simply metaphor.

Recent Work:

Chomsky inaugurated psycholinguistics by introduction of a Language Acquisition Device to the forum of Linguistics and Child Language Acquisition. The LAD, as it is called, is a part of the brain which, in an infant, assists in the detection, internalization, and construction of her/his native tongue from the piecemeal linguistic input which s/he encounters (www.dictionary.com). It is a sort of biological black box. It is the genetically determined universal grammar to which many linguists make reference in present discourse.

Noam Chomsky has spoken in great detail about the ideas we understand as competence and performance (Curzan & Adams, 2009, p. 10). Linguistic competence is the knowledge of a speaker; it is composed of the speaker's mental ensemble of grammatical rules which regulate the language. Linguistic performance, on the other hand is the way we speak, and it is that which we utter. Where as competence is ideal, performance of said grammar is often flawed and replete with errors. Chomsky posited that there are rules that determine how we arrive at performance from the springboard of competence. It is through the medium of these rules that speech comes to be, and these rules, in essence, are what the child decodes so swiftly. The gist is clear from Chomsky's work: underlying forms compose the competence, while surface forms at which we arrive are what constitute the

performance. This is the work of generative linguistics (Curzan & Adams, 2009).

The debate continues. Not all agree with Chomsky. Philip Lieberman of Brown University, a phonetician, tells us the linguistic black box of Chomsky is not possible, for the reason that the human brain is integrated. The LAD is a biological impossibility, due to evolution and to how the brain is organized; it is a synthesis, and there is no reason to suspect that any one part of it would be devoted to language. Language is, rather, an overall effect of our brain's organization and of human inductive reasoning. It is a great gift in my life that I took two classes with Phil Lieberman.

Linguistics & Generative Phonology:

In Spanish the sound /kw/ is a phoneme combination, as is /gw/. They do not occur in many circumstances, but we have minimal pairs determining distinctiveness. Examples of these are “sacar” vs. “quando,” and “hagas” or “haga” (a subjunctive form of “hacer”) vs. “guapo” or “guapa.” In “sacar” we see /k/, and in “hagas” we see /g/. On the other sides of both minimal pairs in question we see consonant clusters /kw/ and /gw/, pointing to the fact that the glide is distinctive in Spanish, with these velar combinations as testament. We could dig further and examine Spanish glides in other positions, for example post-alveolars placement as in the Spanish word “actual;” here it is worth examining whether or not the word is truly /aktwal/. It might very well be an underlying /ak-tu-al/ and thus be trisyllabic. Then we would posit a rule which turns the high back tense vowel /u/ into a surface form [w], as in [ak-twal], rendering it, therefore, bisyllabic (which brings up the related theory, suprasegmentals). This would make sense, in terms of generative phonology, and it would entail the glide being a surface form here, not an underlying form coupled with a velar, as we saw in the examples “quando,” “guapo,” etc., proven by the minimal pair set, e.g. “quando” and “sacar.”

We could go one step further and examine the distribution of the bilabial glide phoneme /w/ in Spanish. We would notice that is seems to come only before the vowel phoneme /a/, as in “cual,” or our recent addition to the set “actual,” in which we said it could be an allophone [w], emerging directly

from /u/ in speech and thus a Spanish predictable allophone of /u/. Synchronic studies of languages seem to demonstrate this particular surface allophone [w] deriving from /u/ as normative. Diachronic studies show us one more thing. Historically, many bilabial glides were systematically deleted in the Romance languages before front vowels such as /i/ and /e/. This explains words like “querer.” “quiso,” and then “quien,” from Latin “quaerere,” “quaesivit,” “quem.” The Spanish words are spoken with no bilabial glide at all, thus /kerer/, /kiso/, and, interestingly enough, we witness the prevalence of the palatal glide in the last word, which is pronounced [kjen], just like its underlying form /kjen./ Originally all these had bilabial glides (ergo /kw-/), in Latin and proto-Romance, if the historically inclined studies are correct. There are those who put their rectitude in question, but they are methodological, and depend on similar ideas as generative linguistics.

English, on the other hand, boasts the sound /kw/ in many words and sound combinations. We see “equal,” “quiet,” “queer,” “quality,” “quell,” and “quill,” and in names such as “Quinn.” I will avoid details, but it seems to crop up before every vowel, even mid vowels like in “equal,” with the notable exception of /u/. This makes sense, as dissimilation would prevent a bilabial glide from coexisting with a high back tense rounded vowel such as /u/. The reason for this preponderance is simple: “qu-” and “-qu-” (as in “acquire”) are pronounced fully with the glide, in all circumstances. The English alphabetic “q” demands a letter “u” afterward, without exception, and this is pronounced, without fail.

How does this sit with Spanish speakers learning English? It can be very hard for them, in short. Where a Spanish speaker hears and speaks no glide (take “guerra,” as an example), we often will hear and speak one, as in “quirky.” In words we borrow from Spanish, like “guerilla,” we will often, however, eliminate the bilabial glide. All this sets up an obstacle course in ESOL. ELL's need to learn a new set of phonological rules for the language they are attempting to master. They also must learn new sounds and sound combinations, before they even approach English rules!

Beginning ELL Activity for Native Spanish Speakers:

What we need to do is emphasize that the elements of"qu-" are pronounced in English. The activity begins with pronouncing the IPA phoneme /w/ for the class. They should repeat it as a group. Then we say it round-robin, person by person. The teacher leads by pronouncing /w/ after each student. This call and response develops a rhythm for learning, and /w/ is the kernel of sound, the essential phoneme we are trying to teach, so common in English with velars. With Spanish-speaking learners, we can enunciate the interrogatives "cual," "cuales," "quando," "quanto," and "quanta." This is our springboard, our common ground, because here we see and listen to the appropriate sound.

We transfer it to English by approximating the "qu" of the simple words "queen," "quill," and "quarrel," which bring out the distinctive /w/ before front-tense, front-lax, and then back-rounded-mid vowels. The teacher exaggerated the /w/ in "queen," because it will be less natural to these learners of English, whether they are adults, teens, or children. If they are kids or adults, they might laugh if we say the words "queen" and "quill" to the tune of "koo-een" and "koo-ill," but do it we must, and the laughs might lighten the spirit of the classroom! We thereupon emphasize the pronunciation of "quarrel" and write all three words on the board in order for the children to see the foreign words. The teacher goes to each word, points to the words in turn, and all students say each word together, without exaggerating as before; rather, they speak as correctly as they can. We want them to work together on this, instead of putting them on the spot.

We have to hold the students accountable, however. Thus we form them into groups of three. Within each group we assign one of the three words in question. Each student is to work with the others to repeat and practice and memorize the correct enunciation of their own word and the words of others. The teacher hovers at each group, giving feedback. The idea of a student who really works out the idea of his or her own word is a helpful point of pedagogy. Each group, after working together, then presents their "words" to the rest of the class, consecutively, and standing up at the front of the class.

We move on to intrasyllabic example “squall” and to intersyllabic “acquire,” and this is homework, to study those more complex examples of English “-qu-” (/kw/). When they all come back the next day they may be verging on the ability to generalize this sound to all its appropriate circumstances in the English language, all from a few examples. This next day is a worksheet, complete with all “qu” words mentioned in this paper (cf. p. 4, the list beginning with “equal,” ending with “quill,” ut supra). Students will see the words, and rewrite them, and there will be class practice parallel to the first day's work, with each student picking and mastering her or his own word, so that a student can not only generalize the sound, but match it to print, and then share it with one another, as expert, individually, of one's own single word. This renders the students teachers of words to one another, and as full intermediates in the sound represented by “qu” in English.

The final step of this unit, as we move to the closing half of the second day's block, will be writing a sentence and reading it aloud in pairs. The teacher gives direction in this regard, but the creativity is what allows the students to interact and express themselves in English using this very sound in a large context, the overall sentence they craft in English with this sound, matching what they hear, see, say, and write, using the simple building blocks they know and those they are learning.

Bibliographical Citations:

Curzan, A. & Adams, M. (2009). *How English Works: A Linguistic Introduction, second edition*. New York, NY: Pearson Education, Inc.

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