

## TRAJECTORIES OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

It has long been realised that conceptualisations of SLA are highly metaphorical in character: language students and their teachers may see the learning process in terms of play, work, discovery, travel, consumption, construction, interaction, negotiation or many other things (apWilliams 1984). It is also a matter of common experience that instruction works best where learners' and teachers' metaphors are in harmony (Anderssen 2001): game-like practice activities are frequently resisted by students who conceptualise language learning as a matter of hard work, while conversely, students who feel that a language is learnt mainly through conversational interaction tend not to take kindly to the systematic study of language forms.

A recent study in this area (Carruthers et al. 2008) has looked at three different conceptual frameworks (CFs) which are prevalent in current theorising about instructed SLA, with a view to comparing their possible impact on learners' achievement. While such comparisons are notoriously resistant to quantitative treatment, they can none the less throw up interesting results which may suggest profitable directions for more rigorous further enquiry. The following is an informal outline account of the study; readers who would like detailed information are referred to Carruthers et al.'s paper.

Forty-eight lower-intermediate learners of English were divided into three groups on the basis of a preliminary questionnaire and interview, whose purpose was to ascertain whether their thinking about language learning tended to favour a dynamic-topological conceptual framework, a narrative-identity framework, or an integrated-constructional framework (see below). Each group was assigned to a team of teachers whose conceptualisation of language learning corresponded, broadly speaking, to that prevalent in the group. Groups were each given three two-hour orientation sessions whose purpose was to explore and elaborate the key ideas of the relevant CF, and to consolidate the group's positive stance vis-à-vis the framework. Students then received 24 hours of appropriately designed CF-congruent instruction, spread over six weeks. A control group was given 30 hours of conventional language lessons. Pre- and post-tests were administered; these were identical for all four groups.

### **CF1: dynamic-topological**

In this framework, learning is conceived of primarily as a dynamic progress along a constantly evolving complex of ecological trajectories (Brik and Tajin 2005). The context and process of learning (and indeed of all communication) are seen as being in a continual state of flux, analogous to the circulation of liquids or gases in the physical world, but more appropriately modelled in an abstract phase space using concepts from sociological telemetry, topology, four-dimensional fluid dynamics, ballistics and other relevant disciplines (Wasserspeier and Gargolla 2007a, b). Learners in the CF1 group were encouraged throughout the study to conceptualise their 'journeys' through the semiotic fluid in visual terms, constructing maps of their trajectories first in two or three dimensions, and then later with the aid of möbius strips, klein bottles, nesting toroids and other dimensionally indeterminate matrices. Several students produced impressive work; one indeed gained a prize from a major art foundation for an Escher-like wallpaper pattern showing herself and her fellow-students trapped in an eddy under a morphosyntactic waterfall.

### **CF2: narrative-identity**

Scholars who espouse this framework concur in seeing the modern self as a conglomeration of mutually permeating and reinforcing narratives, in which centrifugal and centripetal discursive dynamics contribute to the formation of shifting multiple identities (Lametta, Spekulatorius and Glühwein 2006). The language-learning context necessarily requires the learner to confront, negotiate, situate and integrate further multiple identities which may be in conflict both with each other and with those rooted in earlier narratives (Carbonara 2008). Students in the CF2 group took part in a series of game-like activities in which they were given multiple ID cards (one or more for each sociolinguistic macrocontext) and required to act out scenarios designed to foster an ethnographic exploration of their individual and social language learning, seen primarily in terms of narrative-identity construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. The insights gained from this work are well exemplified in a comment made by one of the students towards the end of the study: "In the pub I am Chiquita and I can say 'bugger'. In Mr Gallbone's office I am Miss Carambo and I cannot say 'bugger'." Problems were few, though the researchers report one case of identity theft which deprived the student in question of all but two of his personae, leaving him as 1) an Inuit shaman and 2) a shoplifter named Agnes, about whom little information could be gleaned beyond the fact that she had a pet crocodile.

### **CF3: integrated constructional**

The powerful analytical tools developed in connection with recent work on Construction Grammar are increasingly being extended beyond the lexico-syntactic domain to handle discursive-rhetorical dimensions of communication, enabling researchers for the first time to bring under one conceptual roof the structural features of both the linguistic and the non-linguistic constituents of interactive discourse. It was the ground-breaking realisation by von Muesli (2005) that a remark about the weather, a conversation about the weather, and the act of talking about the weather are *all* examples of constructions, and can be handled jointly by an integrated system of analytical categories, that effectively set the stage for current work in this area. The framework, though complex, is intuitively compelling, and corresponds well to the naive instinct of many learners and teachers that, as FitzRabitt (1974) put it many years ago, 'Actually, everything is pretty much the same'. Students in this group followed a programme in which they 1) interacted in simple communicative tasks, 2) worked in groups to reconstitute and transcribe their interactions, 3) identified and analysed the constructions used, and finally 4) examined the roles that these constructions play in a multi-dimensional functional-cognitive space, establishing how individual linguistic features can be construed as micro-systems embedded in larger discursual and interactive edifices in whose architecture the speakers themselves, and their ongoing interactions as they repeatedly co-construct their reciprocal positioning, are constitutive structural elements.

### **Results**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the post-test results were consistent with Kant's characterisation of the nature of scholarly activity in *Prolegomena* VI-2: 'Was man dreinsteckt, das zieht man natürlich wieder raus' (roughly: 'One gets out what one puts in'). The CF1 group did somewhat better than the others at diagramming information-flow and making origami representations of aspect- and time-relations. CF2 subjects scored particularly well on measures relating to story-telling and lying. The CF3 students showed impressive progress in social integration, which the researchers

attribute to the fact that they spent a great deal of time in discussion trying to decide what a construction was. Overall, however, no significant difference was observed in the total scores of the three experimental groups. The control group, for reasons which are unclear, did substantially better on those components of the test which measured improvement in language knowledge and skills.

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