

Précis to the use of constructions in the teaching of Portuguese as a Third Language

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Abstract

This article introduces the Constructional Approach in the teaching of Portuguese as a third language. This approach departs from the premise that constructions have a prominent role in language use and acquisition as a meaningful source of linguistic input. It is argued that a Constructional Approach allows the learner to achieve automatization of structures over time by building up their frequency as opposed to the frequency of their counterparts in other languages, which by means of routinization of use, are accessed more promptly causing episodes of transfer, especially negative transfer, in the output of the learner. An overview of the state of research in Portuguese as a third language is presented along with an introduction to the approach. Furthermore, examples of constructions, basic elements of the approach, are illustrated and it is concluded that one of the main benefits of this approach, among others, is that it moves the learner from a rule-based learning of language to a more intuitive acquisition process.

Keywords: Construction Grammar, Frequency, Constructions, Portuguese as a Third Language, Curriculum and Program Development, Language Teaching.

Introduction

Developing linguistic proficiency is one of the main goals in the language classroom and of language programs. That is not something that can be done randomly, however, so it needs to be oriented around a series of converging factors that guide the curriculum from beginning to end. Some of these guiding factors include standards for foreign language teaching, such as the National Standards of Foreign Language Learning (NSFLL), a curriculum grounded in such standards along with program development and, probably the paramount factor, a methodological approach to teaching that responds to the needs of the learners and complements each of the other factors. The union of knowledge gathered by these separate sources provides not only a Portuguese program, but any language program, the opportunity to improve its courses, content and delivery.

In order to effectively develop learners' proficiency in any language, and of course, in the case being discussed here, Portuguese, it is imperative to rely on findings obtained through research on the acquisition of the language in question as well as on pedagogy. Of course research in other areas is important as well, but research in the aforementioned areas in the language of the program promotes immediate insight into the issues pertaining to that language and to that program.

As for Portuguese, research has provided educators with the knowledge of the kinds of transfer, either positive or negative, that affect the acquisition of the language. Moreover, research has also provided educators with the opportunity to begin the conversation on methods and approaches that best facilitate learning and help learners separate their languages. In this article it is proposed that a constructionist approach to linguistic description not only can be used to promote proficiency development for learners of Portuguese as a third language, but, in fact, it is the one of best suited approaches for attaining the high levels of proficiency desired by learners and program administrators.

This article will, hence, discuss how research has been a useful tool in program development and in curriculum development. Finally, it will be proposed the use of a constructionist approach to language instruction as a potential way to improve proficiency and, in the long run, reduce the incidence of transfer from other languages.

Portuguese as a 3rd language

Profile of the audience

Research in program development has given us a picture of Portuguese learners in the US (c.f. Milleret, 2008; Milleret & Silveira, 2009, 2010). The most notable characteristics are that the majority of students enrolled tend to be sophomore and above, with higher concentration of

learners as juniors and seniors. Most are Spanish-speakers, either as a first or as a second language, and there is a cultural aspect guiding the learner's choice to learn Portuguese.

This profile has two distinct implications for Portuguese programs and how to teach the language to these learners. Firstly, from the perspective of program development and growth, there is a positive correlation between freshman enrollment and the health of a language program. The earlier students enter a language program, the more likely they are to continue with higher level courses, thus enabling growth. In short, successful language program growth depends on its ability to attract more students in their earlier stages of their academic career. On the other hand, learners at a later stage in their university career come to Portuguese language classes armored with a wealth of knowledge and skills of which an instructor can take full advantage to stimulate, facilitate and accelerate their learning. More specifically, a lot of them come with an array of experiences with language learning/acquisition that can be used to fast-track their advancement in their program of studies.

Method and Approaches

Two approaches are presently being employed to teach Portuguese as a 3rd language. Both approaches are communicative in nature, but focus on different paths of acquisition and production. The first one follows the traditional communicative approach, focusing on oral production, while the second presupposes that receptive skills must be developed prior to oral production. While they are both valid approaches, neither fully addresses the needs of Spanish-speaking learners.

First of all, an exclusive focus on oral production poses one problem for speakers of Portuguese as a third language, especially learners who are being trained to enter the academic

and professional market. This problem is mainly the interference of Spanish in their oral production, at all linguistic levels (semantics, syntax, morphology and phonology).

The second approach, conversely, presupposes that the learner's active skills can be affected by raising the linguistic awareness of the learner based on their receptive skills. In short, learners are exposed to large amounts of reading and listening materials to train them in the new language in the hope that such training will later on deflect transfer from Spanish (c.f. Carvalho, 2002 for an overview of the method). While this is a valid attempt to try to curb the likelihood of transfer taking place in the learner output, it is also a counter-intuitive approach to the learning of foreign language, especially but adults. While children rely heavily on their receptive skills to attain higher proficiency in their active skills when learning a first language, adult learners do not count with the same biological advantages that a child does during the process, which then, makes the process a lot more problematic for the learner, especially for those who already have a second language as part of their linguistic repertoire.

These approaches are valid in their own right; however, they do not really grasp the true nature of Spanish speakers learning Portuguese. While it is true that these learners are able to recognize large amounts of linguistic materials in the target language with little or no training, it has not been attested whether or not this perception leads to the retention of such materials. What is more, learners may be able to understand what is in front of them, but most of the times faulty connections being made between the target language and other languages may deter the learner from advancing later on in their Portuguese career. Some results found in the literature will be discussed to show exactly how this can be a dangerous impediment to learner advancement.

Research: what we know

Research on Portuguese as 3rd language has informed us that transfer or linguistic influence is highly derived from Spanish. This is the principle of Psychotypology (Odlin, 1989, 2002), in that a subsequent language is strongly affected by the most typologically similar language already known by the speaker. But in the case of Portuguese as a 3rd language, this principle goes one step further. Study after study consistently shows that the similarity between the two languages is the strongest determining factor of the kinds of transfer that will emerge.

Scholars have suggested that this is so because learners are believed to be able to understand 50% of what they hear and 94% of what they read in academic texts (Carvalho, 2002; Carvalho & Silva, 2006; Green, 1988; Henriques, 2000; Jensen, 1999). We must consider, however, that there is a lot more in language learning than simply “understanding¹” the forms of a language. Models of language learning have repeatedly pointed out that transfer occurs as a result of the low frequency of the forms in the target language when compared to the higher frequency of the forms of the second/first language (MacWhinney, 2005). In other words, because forms are more used in their first language (or second if they are Portuguese learners who speak Spanish), their frequency is higher compared to the frequency of forms used to express similar concepts in the newly acquired language. This discrepancy promotes transfer from the first (or second) language into the target language simply because concepts are accessed in the first/second languages before they are accessed in the target language, creating, thus, a situation in which transfer is highly likely to occur. Only when the forms in the target language have acquired comparable frequencies to the other languages in the mind of the speaker will they

¹ And by “understanding” here one should assume that it is the comprehension of isolated words or phrases in terms of their dictionary meaning. As of the writing of this article, no work has been published on the “comprehension”, both grammatical and semantic, of different linguistic forms by these learners.

then be able to be accessed without as many interruptions from the other languages, allowing the speaker to produce them more automatically².

For example, non-native Spanish speakers who have had considerable exposure to Spanish have attained structures that if not automatized, are nearly so. By automatization it is meant the ability of a speaker to recall a structure without having to resort to another language in spontaneous speech. This ease of recall, or automatization, appears as a benefit, but if not appropriately curbed, will result in fossilization and linguistic habits that are not natural to the target language.

In short, claims about what can merely be understood only offer us knowledge about the similarities and differences between the two languages, but not how the languages are learned, how they interact in the minds of the learners, and eventually, what processes are involved in the production of each one.

Oral proficiency

Language proficiency can be defined as the speaker's ability to speak or perform in the target language (c.f. R. Ellis, 2002; Gass, 1996 for more detailed accounts of proficiency). In this sense, proficiency is a four-partite concept, consisting of fluency, automatization, perception, and linguistic and social awareness, also known as communicative competence. In short, proficiency is not a linear concept, nor should it be assumed to be developed progressively across all different abilities (listening, speaking, reading and writing), rather, proficiency develops irregularly across the different abilities when exposure and opportunities to practice new language functions are guided repeatedly over time.

² In this scenario, it must be taken into account that increased production, and thus frequency, of forms that are not part of the target language may render them fossilized, which is an unwanted outcome in the learning of a foreign language, but many times inevitable.

There are, however, issues with the notion of proficiency in that it can be confused with fluency and automatization, which in this work are treated separately. The former has been defined as the ability to produce speech at a normal, task-appropriate rate without undue pausing, hesitation, repetition or reformulation (Dechert, 1985). This is a multi-componential construct in which subdimensions can be distinguished, such as speed, rate and density of delivery. It is not to be confused with proficiency, but it is an elemental part of it, for one can be fluent in certain contexts, and not in others.

Automatization or automaticity, on the other hand, is the ability to produce streams of words and phrases with rapidity and accuracy. There are two types of theoretical approaches to automatization, namely memory-based and process-based. The former emphasizes the strengthening of associations in memory until the associated elements are stored as a single unit, ready to be retrieved as a whole. The latter, conversely, holds that automatization is a matter of practicing cognitive procedures (such as the application of grammatical rules) so that their implementation becomes faster and faster. It has been proposed that language learners benefit from the fluent use of proceduralized strings (Wray, 2000, 2002), if they manage to assemble them at high speed. In short, fluent production of these proceduralized strings is a consequence of the very fast assemblage of its components rather than holistic retrieval from memory (c.f. N. C. Ellis, 2002a; N. C. Ellis, 2002b; R. Ellis, 2002).

This four-part division of proficiency is centered on the notion of input, which most theories of language acquisition hold constitutes the primary data for the acquisition process and possesses a determining function, albeit within the constraints imposed by the learner's internal mechanisms (VanPatten, 2003). The role of output is more controversial, but most models of

language acquisition will include it in their account as “production may force the learner to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing” (Swain, 1985, p. 245).

In this sense, output also functions as input. As language learners produce language, their utterances and productions become a new source of input. The same holds true for the production of their peers, which in turn, become input to learners. In short, language learners can constitute an important source of target language input and output for each other (Gass, 1996; Pica, Lincoln Porter, Paninos, & Linnell, 1996).

It can be argued, however, that this interplay between input and output is only effective when certain constraints are met, namely, the target language is at the appropriate level for the learner to produce it and the input is perceptually rich, that is, it is comprehensible by the learner and linguistically and socially relevant. Constructions, as will be described below, fit all these criteria, and they go further as will be discussed shortly.

The Constructional approach

Constructional approaches to linguistic description are defined by two key properties. Scholars working with constructional approaches agree that the units of grammar are symbolic, that is to say, they are conventionalized relationships between forms and meaning. They also agree that there is no real distinction between “core” phenomena central to grammar and “peripheral” phenomena which are not so central (Chomsky, 1965). These two properties make constructional approaches particularly relevant to how patterns of structures should be presented to language learners.

There are different approaches regarding the constructional agenda, but only some of them can be discussed in this article. Some constructional approaches are to be found at the relatively informal and functionalist end of linguistic theorizing; others are highly formalized and

do not have a great deal to say about functional pressures in language. Some constructional approaches restrict their assumptions to a willingness to admit non-compositionality to the ontology of their grammatical theories; others assume that language is usage-based, and that non-compositionality is not the only basis for taking a constructional approach.

However, these different background assumptions from scholars working with constructional approaches - the different views of what should be in a constructional theory of grammar - do not affect the utility of constructional approaches to language teaching. Once it is agreed that grammar is symbolic, the issue becomes identifying the symbols of the grammar of the language being taught.

The central claim of any constructional approach is that grammar is symbolic, that words are relationships between forms and meaning (Bergan & Chang, 2005; Bybee, 2010; Bybee & Torres Cacoullos, 2009; Croft, 2001; Fillmore, Kay, & O'Connor, 1988; Goldberg, 2006; Goldberg, Casenhiser, & Sethuraman, 2004). A noun, for instance, has a phonological shape, a syntax, a sense, and a referent. The first two are part of the word's form, and the last two are part of its meaning. In some theories of construction grammar, morphemes are likewise constructions (Croft, 2001; Goldberg, 1995, 2006). According to Croft and Cruse (2004), clauses, sentences, or subjects, all instantiate form-meaning pairings which involve conventional units that are larger than individual words.

A second major claim follows from the observation that there are limits to compositionality (Hay, 2001; Hay & Baayen, 2002, 2005). In their seminal paper, Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor (1988) explored idiomaticity, and in so doing demonstrated that there is partial regularity and partial compositionality. Nevertheless, there is also an element to meaning which is not predictable, and which suggests that it is not simply compositional. It is the status of not

belonging to one or the other that provides evidence for a constructional approach. As Nunberg, Wason and Sag (1994) point out, it is not the case that idioms are fixed expressions with fixed meanings.

Given that idioms exist, and given that they have their own meanings, it follows that there are constructions, that is, units of grammar which are larger than words³, which are meaningful, and whose meaning is not regularly predictable from their parts. They provide learners with the opportunity to increase their oral proficiency. These learners need to be exposed to comprehensible input that can be replicated in the output. It is argued here that this approach fits these needs effectively.

Many researchers, including Ellis (2002), Schmidt (2004), Weinert (1995) and Wray (2002) have demonstrated that an approach that focuses on formulaicity contributes to language acquisition and attainment. It can be extrapolated that constructions, not only those that are formulaic in nature, but even those that are highly compositional, should also be considered in the types of input presented to the learners. Constructions is a term used here to denote a variety of related phenomena also referred to as **formulaic sequences** (*quebrar o gelo, bater na mesma tecla, etc.*), **lexical phrases or chunks** (*falar a verdade vs. contar uma mentira, etc.*), **standardized similes** (*escuro feito breu, faminto como leão, claro como a água, duro como uma pedra, etc.*), **proverbs and clichés** (*tempestade em copo d'água, sem pé nem cabeça, quem espera sempre alcança, etc.*), **social routine formulae** (*tudo bem? Prazer em conhecê-lo/a, etc.*), **verb-noun collocations** (*correr um risco, tomar café da manhã, etc.*), **verb-preposition collocations** (*gostar de, confiar em, etc.*), and **open-slotted constructions** (word order, X *dar* Y *a* Z, etc.). Some of these sequences are fixed as far as their lexical composition is concerned,

³ This does not imply that there are not units smaller than words, on the contrary, by units here it is meant items that are produced through one processing strategy.

while others occur in different guises, showing syntagmatic expansion (*muito prazer em conhecê-lo/a*) or paradigmatic substitution (*tudo bem? Tudo bom?*). These substitutions are especially evident in open-slotted constructions.

It is claimed that 50%-70% of adult language is produced in the form of constructions that are formulaic and not very compositional (Sinclair, 1991). The remainder can be said to be instances of open-slot constructions. While still fixed, open-slot constructions allow for more compositionality than formulaic expressions. It is now well recognized that mastery of formulaic language is a prerequisite for learners to attain a native-like command of the language, because it helps them produce stretches of discourse that sound natural (or idiomatic) to native speakers, and because formulaic language facilitates fluency.

Frequently occurring constructions are believed to play a crucial role in language acquisition because they provide the material for exemplar-based learning, which is memory-based and relies on both holistic storage and retrieval.

Recall that there are two types of theoretical approaches to automatization, namely memory-based and process-based. Memory-based production is characterized by ample use of constructions that are more formulaic in nature, which allows the speaker to retrieve forms holistically, whereas process-based production is characterized by “novel” language production. It must be noted that speakers will employ both forms, and which one will take precedence over the other will depend on the particular circumstances of language use: to employ a process-based mode requires conditions that allow for planning time, whereas the memory-based mode facilitates fluency under ‘real-time’ conditions. Thus, it is preferable, and even advisable, to focus instruction on memory-based automatization, which, long term, can be argued to promote increased proficiency.

Conclusion

In this article, constructions, i.e., linguistic expressions, no matter how concrete or abstract, that is directly associated with a particular meaning or function, and whose form and meaning cannot be compositionally derived, were introduced as possible candidates to better teach Portuguese to Spanish speakers for they provide a meaningful input that can both remedially prevent the interference of the latter as well as provide learners with meaningful output, which can then be recycled as input to strengthen the connections and representations of the target language in their minds. Whenever possible, learners should be given language in constructions and should be asked to produce it likewise. It is only by reproducing these constructions over and over that learners will be able to automatize them and thus attain proficiency.

Constructions provide the learner with the tools to build up their frequency by exploiting their memory-based learning, which is more intuitive and native-like, which in turn, allows for the learner to produce forms more rapidly in real time since these forms are being retrieved more holistically, and not undergoing rule-based transformations. Take the Portuguese ditransitive construction (SUBJECT + VERB + DIRECT OBJECT + INDIRECT OBJECT), which is an example of an abstract construction, exemplified by *João deu um livro à Maria* ‘João gave Maria a book’. This construction, in all its instantiations carries a transfer meaning, that is the notion that the referent of the subject transfers the referent of the direct object to the referent of the indirect object, irrespective of the particular verb occurring in this construction. Thus, it is more productive for learners to receive their input in the form of constructions, rather than piecemeal instances of language followed by grammatical rules. When encountering a construction, a learner is faced not only with the separate words that make up the construction, but with a

grammatical pattern that exists in the target language. Exposure to similar constructions, therefore, will allow the learner to absorb the grammatical pattern more naturally.

Another example that relates to grammatical patterns in the language can be seen in the many uses, or patterns, that compound the Present Subjunctive in Brazilian Portuguese. While grammarians and textbook writers offer pages and pages of semantic possibilities and syntactic examples of the Present Subjunctive, the grammatical pattern can be summarized in two constructions, namely $TO\ BE_{PRESENT} + ADJECTIVE + QUE + VERB_{SUBJUNCTIVE}$ as in *é importante que estudemos para o exame...* ‘it is important that we study for the exam...’ and $VERB_{FEELING}^4 + QUE + VERB_{SUBJUNCTIVE}$ as in *espero que possamos nos encontrar no futuro...* ‘(I) hope we can meet in the future...’. While it is important that learners are aware of the meanings these constructions convey when used, it is of paramount importance that they learn the construction in conjunction with the meaning, and not the meaning first as it is widely taught in Portuguese language texts. This is simply because deriving form from meaning is counterintuitive to the way languages function in real time where forms, functions and meanings are accessed simultaneously.

In short, constructions offer instructors the possibility to work with language as it is used, and learners with form and meaning pairings that they can use effectively to communicate their needs. These pairings are effective blocks in the building of proficiency for a language learner for they are concrete representations of the language produced by native speakers, thus allowing the learner to produce language that is more native-like.

Lastly, it is through meaningful interaction that learners are able to retain linguistic knowledge. It is counter-productive to work on language (be it grammatically or at any other

⁴ By ‘feeling’ here it is meant any sort of emotion.

level) should we not foster an environment where the learner may use it interactively. While the classroom environment may seem contrived and artificial, it is also the place where learners can interact with one another and where they can build linguistic mementos of their interactions.

Hopefully, these seeds in memory will be retrieved later in real-time use.

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