

Grammatical orientation: fundamental language differences on learnability

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Abstract: The world languages can be roughly divided into three types based on grammatical orientation, e.g. reality-oriented type (e.g. Russian, Chinese); speaker-oriented (e.g. Japanese, Serbian); hearer-oriented (e.g. English, Swedish). Differences borne out of grammatical orientations are hardly ever taken into consideration in making teaching materials. Each type has its peculiarities in grammatical system (e.g. reality-oriented languages have a description of situation as a basic unit, while speaker-oriented languages consider speaker's experience as a base). Such differences can create fundamental differences in the language use in learners' L2, and this influence cannot be underestimated. In this paper, it is aimed to raise awareness of such differences and point out that cross-linguistic comparison can offer numerous points for improving L2 learning.

Key Words: Grammatical orientation, cognition, semiotic difference, learnability

Introduction

In this paper, an attempt is made to integrate a typological comparison of world languages with a foreign language teaching method. The world languages are divided into three groups, based on grammatical orientation as described in Section 2. According to different orientation types, each language can be considered to possess its own unique semiotic resource, and problems encountered in learning a new language is related to how one can decode this semiotic resource. It is argued here that language teaching can be organised according to orientation types, and based on a learner's first language and a target language, we need to create different teaching materials in order for a learner to achieve the result more efficiently.

This paper is organised as follows: the basic distinction concerning grammatical orientation is shown first, immediately followed by some possible problems in this distinction. After establishing these backgrounds, some possible problems in cross-cultural communication are presented. Such problems can be, as proposed in this paper, dealt with in teaching using the basic concept of grammatical orientation. However, there still remain some possible challenges, which are listed at the end.

Grammatical orientation

It is common that different packaging of expression units exists, but they can be classified into three groups, termed here as orientation (Durst-Andersen 1992: 102-105; 2005; 2008: 9-10). The first type is mainly concerned with a model of situations in reality. This type makes a firm distinction between a state caused by an activity and an activity intending to cause a state. This is normally marked by aspect. In Slavic languages, for instance, this distinction has to be made on each verb. In Serbian imperfective has a suffix *-ja* (e.g. (1b)), while in Russian perfective is overtly expressed with a prefix *po-* (e.g. (2a)). It also distinguishes a real world from an imaginative one. This type is termed as reality-oriented grammar. In this type, a speaker acts as a reporter, speaks with an objective voice.

Serbian

- (1) a. *ubiti* 'kill (PRFV)'
b. *ubi-ja-ti* 'kill (IMPRFV)'

Russian

- (2) a. *po-spati* 'take a nap (PRFV)'
b. *spati* 'sleep (IMPRFV)'

The second type functions as a symptom of the speaker's experience of situations. This type involves aspect, but also a complex modal system in order to express explicitly which part of situation is experienced by a speaker. For instance, some languages have a modal construction known as evidential (see Aikhenvald 2004), which explicitly indicates what and how a speaker experienced a situation. Cherokee examples in (3) and (4) illustrate how evidential actually works. The suffix *-iši* in (3) indicates that a speaker has a first-hand (or direct) experience over the event, while *-eši* in (4) shows that a speaker has to rely on information inferable from outside. This type is called speaker-oriented grammar. A speaker talks about his/her experience as a basic unit with a subjective voice and acts as a commentator.

- Cherokee (Iroquoian)
- (3) a. *wesa u-tlis-iši*
cat it-run-FIRST.PST
'A cat ran' (I saw it running)
- b. *un-atiyohl-iši*
they-argue-FIRST.PST
'They argued.' (I heard them arguing)
- Cherokee (Iroquoian)
- (4) a. *u-wonis-eši*
he-speak-NON.FIRST.PST
'He spoke.' (someone told me)
- b. *u-gahnan-eši*
it-rain-NON.FIRST.PST
'It rained.' (I woke up, looked out and saw puddles of water)

The third type has an elaborate system of identifying different types of information, such as new and old, referable and non-referable, etc. This is encoded in the simple past tense (as opposed to the perfective aspect) or articles (e.g. definite vs. indefinite). These aid the hearer to decode details of information and identify whether a referent is familiar to him or not. This type is known as hearer-oriented language. In this type, interlocutors consider information as its basic unit. The speaker is a second-person-oriented speaker, acts as an informer and speaks with an intersubjective voice.

These three different grammatical orientation types are summarised in Table 1. Note that these three types are prototypical cases and there are a number of intermediate stages. This is largely due to historical changes, and we will turn to this point later (cf. Figure 3).

Table 1. Grammatical orientation types

	Reality-oriented	Speaker-oriented	Hearer-oriented
Representatives	Russian, Chinese	Japanese, Serbian	English, Swedish
Basic unit	Situation	Experience	Information
Speaker orientation	Third person	First person	Second person
Speaker function	Reporter	Communicator	Informer
Identification mark	Aspect prominence	Mood prominence	Tense prominence

Various differences among these types may be more significant than one may expect them to be. For instance, the presence or absence of articles often corresponds to the difference in orientation type. The definite article is an important discourse marker for reference, and it functions as a clear indicator for the hearer that he/she has to be able to trace a referent's identity. Such a subtle difference in discourse is not so significant in describing a situation. Reality-oriented languages might have demonstratives which functions quite similarly to the definite articles in hearer-oriented languages, but there is no discourse function in them. With speaker-orientation, it may be useful to have articles, but not necessary, since there is no absolute need for the overt expression of discourse reference as long as the speakers are clear about referents. And the use and importance of the definite article is also shown in its historical development. The common source for the definite article is demonstrative pronouns (Heine and Kuteva 2002: 109-111), e.g. English *the* is derived from Old English demonstrative *se* (s.v. OED *the* dem. a. (def. article) and pron.). However, note that there are some cases where a numeral 'one' turning into a definite article. Irish has a definite article *an*, as in (5b), but not an indefinite

pronoun (e.g. (5a)). Etymologically, *an* ‘the’ is derived from a numeral *aon* ‘one’ in Old Irish. The numeral ‘one’ is often turning into an indefinite article (Heine and Kuteva 2002: 220-221), but the definite sense can be derived from a numeral via a restrictive sense of ‘only’. In such languages, it is often the case that so-called double definiteness is found, e.g. *an* ‘the’ and *sin* ‘that’ in (5c). This is so, since the numeral origin allows a demonstrative to coexist with the definite article. Nevertheless, the discourse referential system in Irish works in favour of the hearer even without an indefinite article.

- Irish
- (5) a. *Tá leabhar agam*
is book at.me
‘I have a book.’
- b. *Tá an leabhar agam*
is the book at.me
‘I have the book.’
- c. *Tá an leabhar sin agam*
is the book that at.me
‘I have that book.’

Another interesting point concerning the article is that the definite article is often created in contact-intense areas. Consider the map in Figure 1. The darker shades represent the presence of definite articles, and the high concentration can be found in West Africa, Europe, Papua New Guinea and the western coast of North America. In such areas, contacts are often made among mutually-intelligible languages for trading and speakers may be forced to help hearers identify referents in discourse. This type of communication may raise necessity for grammatical devices such as the definite article. This is also common in Europe and as argued in Toyota (forthcoming), the dialect mixing in the Middle English/Early Modern English periods helped the definite article to grammaticalise fully in English. Such contacts also suggest that the use of definite articles is meant for hearers, not speakers.

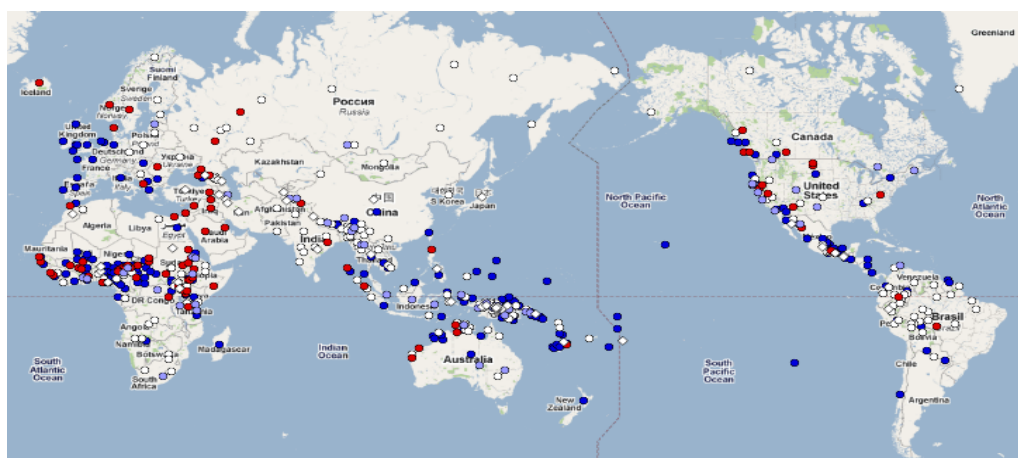


Figure 1. Presence of definite articles (Dryer 2008)

For another case to illustrate how orientation works, we can take a look at possession. English most commonly uses a verb *have* to express possession, although other verbs, such as *belong*, *hold*, *own*, etc. can also refer to possession. The lexical verb works very well in English since the main expression unit in English is information (i.e. hearer-orientation), and the lexical verb of possession is a simple way of referring to who owns what. This is not the same in languages with reality-orientation. In Russian, for instance, there is a lexical verb *imati* ‘have’. It may appear to be identical to the English counterpart, but *imati* ‘have’ is not normally used to denote possession. Instead, Russian uses another verb *jest* ‘exist’ in a phrase ‘something exists with possessor’.

Those languages with reality orientation are not primarily concerned with experience or information, but an objective description of a situation. With *imati* ‘have’, it is obligatory to insert a subject, which can possibly turn a sentence into a structure used for the purpose of showing experience or information. In order to keep an objective viewpoint over situation in reality-oriented languages, the use of locative sense and verbs denoting state is better suited for the expression of possession.

- Russian
- (6) a. ?*Ya imeju zenu*
 I.NOM.SG have.PRS wife.ACC
 'I have a wife.' (it has a sexual connotation)
- b. *U menje jest' zena*
 with I.ACC.SG exist.PRS wife.NOM
 'I have a wife.' (lit. 'wife exists with me')

- Russian
- (7) a. ?*Ya imeju knigu*
 I have.PRS book.ACC.SG
 'I have a book.'
- b. *U menja jest' kniga*
 with I.ACC.SG exist.PRS book.NOM
 'I have a book.' (lit. 'book exists with me')

The instances exemplified in (6) and (7) illustrate how common phrases or expressions can be a vital clue in identifying the grammatical orientation. Possession has been extensively studied in the past (cf. Lyons 1977: 722; Heine 1997) and several patterns have been identified cross-linguistically. For instance, Heine (1997: 47) identifies eight possible structures expressing possession and ones based on locational sense are shown in (8). These divisions, however, have not been considered from the perspectives of grammatical orientation types. It has been claimed that the most common strategy to express possession is the use of location schema (i.e. (8i)) (see, among others, Benveniste 1966: 200; Lyons 1977: 722). Structures involving the locational sense are very common in possession, including the Russian examples (6) and (7). Locational sense is very useful in describing a situation, and if there is a strong connection between the orientation type and the expression of possession, there is a strong indication found here that the majority of the world languages have the reality orientation. More research has to be done in this area, but one should not overlook such possibilities of connection.

- (8) i. *Y is located at X* (the Location Schema)
 ii. *X is with Y* (the Companion Schema)
 iii. *Y exists for/to X* (the Goal Schema)
 iv. *Y exists from X* (the Source Schema)

Problems in cross-orientation communication

The classification shown in Table 1 is a very rigid, rather optimistic one. In analysing typological data, one soon realises that it is hard to draw a line between different types and making a specific text for a specific orientation type and level can be a highly demanding task to achieve.

As already shown in the previous section, the grammatical orientation can show some differences that can be beyond the mere grammatical features. For instance, metaphors and sense of humours can differ according to orientation type, e.g. metaphors and humours used in speaker or hearer orientation are often literary understood in reality orientation. Thus, literary effects do not function as they are meant in speaker and hearer-oriented languages. Likewise, greetings can have various consequences across different types of orientations. Greetings ritual can vary from culture to culture (cf. Lundmark 2009), but phrases such as 'How are you?' can be an indicator of orientation. In hearer-orientation, it can be a part of a general greeting, since what matters in the act of greeting is to show that one is greeting and the content is not so significant. In reality-orientation, however, contents of greetings do matter and 'How are you?' is interpreted as a proper question regarding health. These cases clearly show that the use of languages is not purely dependent on grammatical differences. Students may learn basic grammatical rules, but this does not mean that they are fully aware of subtle differences hidden behind surface structures. Thus, some students may consider it polite to ask how his interlocutors are, although this may result in the opposite effect.

This type of differences can be also found in narratives. Situation-oriented languages tend to develop background information, such as place and time, in earlier part of discourse, and it may take a while before a speaker/narrator reaches a main point. Type A and B in Figure 2 may schematically represent how narrative works in reality-oriented languages. Speaker-oriented languages may also use these types, but they can reach a main point direct, as shown in Type C in Figure 2. Hear-oriented

Orientation: application to learning

In teaching and learning languages, it is obvious that students have to deal with various features of languages. What is normally covered in conventional teaching methods is grammar and pronunciation, but cultural differences are often not integrated into teaching programme. It is possible to argue that each language has its own speaking culture (cf. linguistic relativity), and this point can be extended to dialects. Facing this wide diversity, a task of creating materials accommodating both linguistic features and cultural diversity, it may seem impossible to teach language appropriately. However, this task can be sorted relatively easily once grammatical orientation is taken into consideration. Our working hypothesis is that languages that belong to the same orientation types are easier to acquire, since problems that students have to face are mainly grammatical, not socio-cultural or different world views. We have seen in Section 3 that different orientation types can use certain phrases in a totally different manner. This type of differences is certainly beyond the grammatical level, but manageable as a variation among different languages within the same orientation.

It is possible to make a brief guideline for cross-orientation learning to raise awareness of different world view encoded in basic functional aspects of languages. In order to achieve this, learning materials should reflect differences in orientation. Thus, there is no single course book for one language at one level (beginner, intermediate, etc.). This means that at least three different teaching materials are required at each level according to different orientations for a single language, aiming at different background of learners. Let us take an example of student learning English. Swedish learners can simply learn grammatical features without much attention to general world view of English speakers, since they share it through the same orientation. As for Russian speakers, there must be a thorough instruction on differences in the world view and the use of languages, since their world view is supposed to be totally different from that of English speakers. Speakers of Serbian or Japanese are located somewhere in between Russian and Swedish speakers. They certainly require some explanation concerning differences, but not as thorough as the one for Russian speakers.

The differences can be summarised in Table 2. This is a simplified version to illustrate a general pattern proposed in this working hypothesis. There are three levels (beginner, intermediate and advanced) in conjunction with three orientation types. They make nice possible text types, marked as Text 1 to Text 9 in Table 2. The number of text indicates that the lesser the number is, the more explanation learners need. Thus, a beginner of Russian speaker needs the most intensive explanation, and an advanced learner of Swedish speaker need the least explanation, a learner of Serbian speaker forming an intermediate stage.

Table 2. Different teaching materials for learning English according to grammatical orientation types

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
Reality orientation (Russian)	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
Speaker orientation (Serbian)	Text 4	Text 5	Text 6
Hearer orientation (Swedish)	Text 7	Text 8	Text 9

Challenges

Classifications such as the one shown in Table 2 are perhaps easier said than done. This is perhaps because it is difficult to identify clearly what language belongs to what orientation type. As indicated earlier in Section 2, there are numerous intermediate stages and there are numerous cases of combinations of various features. For instance, Japanese in principle belongs to a speaker-oriented type, but its greetings are much closer to the one commonly found in situation-oriented languages. Thus, it is hard to draw a line between different types and making a specific text for a specific orientation type and level can be a highly demanding task to achieve.

In addition, considerable revision of teaching materials may require according to this method, and teachers may also be required to be familiar with some basic linguistic differences. Language teachers are not necessarily linguists and they may have to learn some basic linguistic differences in order to manage with teaching materials properly. This may involve a considerable amount of training

Summary

Learning a new language across the border of orientation requires much more effort, i.e. students are required to learn more than grammatical matters, but different world view in a semiotic sense and socio-cultural matters concerning a target language. This point has not been noticed, but this

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method may solve various problems concerning cross-cultural aspects of language learning. Thus, learners can achieve proficiency of languages at a much wider perspective. Thus, the basic differences based on orientation can be useful in teaching, especially when a learner's first language and a target language belong to different orientation types. There are various challenges concerning this approach, but it is hoped that this line of research will bear fruitful results in the near future.

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