

Functional-Semantic Fields and Teaching of Kazakh Language¹

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Abstract

This paper describes the systematic functional approach (with a particular focus on the functional-semantic approach) for integrating language learning in a second language context. Using Kazakh as an example, I discuss how this framework has been successfully integrated into teaching both second-language learners and heritage speakers. This approach is especially useful in less commonly taught languages, of which Kazakh is a prime example. Among its numerous advantages include: intentionally building upon students' prior learning, fostering students' communication ability, and avoiding rote memorization of limited grammar and vocabulary. In addition, students learn topics which are communication based, and thus the structure of grammar and the grammar system are reinforced by connecting from the beginning to advanced levels based on the same topic. This method not only places the language in a contractual discourse, but also teaches heritage speakers how to use the language in a powerful way, preserving and enriching their language in different social contexts. In support of the functional-semantic approach, the textbook is organized according to the communicational and functional characteristics of the language.

Keywords: Functional-semantic field, Kazakh language, functional grammar, teaching Kazakh language

Introduction

The motivation of language learning not only focuses on establishing vocabulary and grammar, but also using these in active communication. The most critical problem in learning a new language is how language learners become more functional in the use of the language when they are acquiring the language. In other words, gaining functionality in a language means not only mastering grammar, but also internalizing a variety of forms and actively employing a wide range of vocabulary and grammatical constructions in one's speech and writing. The theory of semantic fields first appeared in German linguistics (Guliga et al, 1969; cited from Bondarko, 2005) under the influence of similar understandings of systemization in the fields of physics and the other natural sciences. There has been much research on the functionality of language learning (Shur, 1974; Zolotova, 2004; Sidorova, 1994; Bondarko, 1983, 2003. Rysal'dy, 1980, 2011; Kuzekova, 2010, 2012). Bondarko (2005) applied this theory systematically into Russian language teaching and extended it to a more in-depth level. The author established the bases of the functional systemic grammar which emphasizes the systematization of grammar in textbook materials through semantic fields. This has resulted in new methods for mastering structural grammar, which are founded upon a linguistic basis of language learning and which create a functional syntax by grouping functions of a language. In other words, students are exposed to grammatical constructions and vocabulary within specific settings and situations. Moreover, the various semantic categories of a language are identified and presented in a systematized manner in pedagogical materials, so that as students

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makes progress, they are introduced to an ever widening range of options for expressing the same meaning in different social contexts, at different rhetorical levels, and with different levels of complexity.

Functional grammar uses the “field” approach to the language system (Parmenova, 2002). According to Parmenova, the concept of the field is in its widest application learning grammar from the pedagogical field. Language is not seen as a system of levels (phonetics, vocabulary, phraseology, morphemes, morphology, syntax), but as a system of functional-semantic fields (FSF), each of which combines multi-level language tools, expressed in language similar or similar values. Within each field there is a certain order, a hierarchy of different levels, which are united not only by the similarity of values, but also by the correlation of functions

The priority of the center and periphery within the FSF helps one comprehend the rules for the selection of a particular language unit for a specific act of speech. In the practice of language teaching (especially in schools), it is not necessary to give up the traditional level system of language education. Rather, the use of recent theoretical research in the field of functional and communicative grammar can and should give a positive impetus to the improvement of language education.

Usage in Kazakh language

The use of FSF in language-learning and language-teaching materials is widespread in the teaching of many of the major world languages as second or foreign languages (cited in Matkhanova, 2005; Rodionova, 2005, pp 158 - 165). However, functional strategies have yet to be systematically incorporated into the teaching of Kazakh language as a foreign language. Historically and currently, the standard approach to teach Kazakh as a foreign language has been to stress memorization of basic grammar while using limited forms in communication. Once students can recognize and use this limited number of forms, they are considered to have mastered the language. This approach is problematic given that the grammatical forms and vocabulary that students have been exposed represent only a small fraction of the forms and vocabulary that make up spoken and literary Kazakh. The result is that, while students may express themselves in basic terms, they continue to struggle to understand native speakers in natural speech and authentic texts. Likewise, their speech and writing lack the subtlety and flexibility that are expected in the utterances of a person considered “functional” in the language. This is, indeed, currently the case among non-native speakers of Kazakh who have attempted to learn the language through school and work. Moreover, in our experience we have found that many heritage speakers of Kazakh who are studying the language struggle to read novels and articles in Kazakh and have considerable troubles expressing their ideas or opinions in class discussions and written assignments.

There are two main reasons why FSF remains little used in Kazakh language pedagogy. The first is that research that divides the Kazakh language into semantic fields remains incomplete. The second is that the semantic fields in the Kazakh language have been yet integrated into language textbooks. Thus, our goal in this article is twofold: first, the extension of the current research on defining semantic fields in the Kazakh language; and, second, creation of a new series of textbook in Kazakh-language that structured around these semantic field textbooks for non-native speakers. The grammatical structure of the Kazakh language is complicated and multifaceted, but at the same time it possesses a unified system. In teaching Kazakh, not all aspects are included in the teaching system by using traditional teaching methods, which is structural approach. The objective investigation of the system demands new techniques, such as the most of effective of which is, in our view, the modern theory of functional semantic approach.

Recently, functional semantic theory has been applied to some fields of the Kazakh language in the works of the author who proposes this project (Kuzekova, 2010, 2012). Our goal is to widen the ranges of topics analyzing on the basis of actual linguistic material and to use the results of our research as a basis for creating a new system of tutorials for teaching Kazakh language. We should find the fields of names semantic categories in Kazakh language.

Kazakh language teaching will be organized by following topics (Kuzekova, 2010): expressions of the subject-predicate relationship; expression of object relations; characteristics of action; attributive relations; expressions of attributive and adjectival relations; expressions of spatial relations; time relations; expressions of comparison; expressions of conditional relations; expressions of negation; expressions of objections; expressions of causal relationship; expressions of purpose; expressions of different phases of action; expressions of human condition and condition of the environment; expressions of the nature of action; expressions of uncertainty; interrogative expressions; indirect speech; language communication tools; the concept of numbers, etc. We already listed 25 different categories' of semantic clusters based on the functional usage, but we think these are not enough to cover all aspects of Kazakh language. In categorizing semantic fields, we focused on the basis of spoken materials.

The structure of the functional-semantic field consists of a core part and a periphery (Bondarko, 1987). The core is the heart of the constructed grammatical categories, which possess a full set of distinguishing characteristics in their maximum concentration. The periphery includes the members of a functional semantic field in which its functional burden is less, but it is close to core part of the semantic categories. Therefore, the periphery is also supplementary for the core; in other words, the periphery will work to extend the core under the same topic. The periphery is usually based on natural communications.

We arranged the grammar and vocabulary in specific settings and situation according to functional-semantic bases and thus, these settings and situations will be extended into four progressive levels (A1, A2, B1, B2). Moreover, this approach will require students to actively engage linguistic material through interactive speaking, listening, and writing activities. In addition to these two characteristics, it will also encourage students to associate particular vocabulary, language patterns and communication styles with particular contexts. These advantages of the new textbook make sharply contrast with the current method of teaching Kazakh language, which relies heavily on the memorization of decontextualized materials. For example, if the topic is about expressing attributive relationships kills by level (Kuzekova, 2010), we will construct the linguistic elements by different levels including as flowing structures: (1) level 1 includes describing items by quantities and quality, color, and size etc.; (2) level 2 focuses on topics beginning with describing shape, the presence or absence of the property to expressing the relationship between properties or items etc.; and (3) in level 3, which is the advanced level, students describe the attributive relationships via idiomatic patterns or at a more academic level.

The core of this set of textbooks will be a group of defined semantic fields that students might typically encounter at various levels of complexity over the course of their language education. Thus, in contrast to the present system of language education, which offers a student only one or two standardized forms for expressing a particular idea, this new series of textbooks will focus on introducing students to an ever-broadening range of choices for expressing the same concepts and ideas as from basic level to advanced level through their language training. In other words, this method puts the emphasis on the recycling and accumulation of previous language components into higher level learning. In this way, by the time students reach an advanced level of Kazakh, they will command not only the basic forms (i.e. simple past, present, and future tense aspects), but also a range forms that allow them to understand native speakers and incorporate greater nuance into their own speech.

The theory of functional semantic fields is considered the basis of one of the most modern techniques for the description of language. Furthermore, in our opinion, the issue we discussed here can be applied to the study of any objective phenomenon in addition to linguistics. In the structural approach, which is based on grammar and linguistic knowledge, language learners can only acquire grammar, but they cannot effectively incorporate the skills into their communication, and, thus, their acquisition levels still remain tightly bound to limited knowledge of the grammar rules. This prevents students from uncovering and appreciating the richness of the language.

Advantages of this approach

When compared to the structural approach, the advantages of using the functional-semantic approach in language teaching are based on the fact that language is considered as a functional-semantic system. The purpose of the functional-semantic approach is to systematize vocabulary and syntactic structures. For example, in the teaching of the expression time through the functional-semantic approach, we minimize the grammar tools at the same time that we combine the communicative-functional characteristics of the time expressions in teaching. This topic spans the beginning to advanced levels of Kazakh. At the beginning level, the topic includes the expression of simple clock time (1 p.m., 2:35 p.m., etc.), expressing dates (29th of April, etc.), expressing the time of day (morning, day time, evening) and meal times (breakfast, lunch, etc.). Next, in the intermediate level, we include the expressions of habitual action (daily, every year), intervals (from 9 to 5), expressions of beginning and ending (since the fall, starting at 5), and expressions of indefinite time (around 5:00, for about 3 hours) etc. At the advanced level, we include more complicated topics, such as expressions of time through idioms. Each level has sublevels, and sublevels have their own hierarchy status in using the functional-semantic characteristics of the topics. The same topic will be repeated at different levels of language acquisition by adding extended functional-semantic characteristics.

As currently planned, the Kazakh textbook created using the functional-semantic approach will be useful in the Philology Department of a foreign language program with future teachers of Kazakh language. The materials will be assembled specifically for achieving our primary goal, which is the teaching of the syntax of the Kazakh language through functional-semantic and structural-semantic approaches. We recognize that both approaches are necessary in order to understand the mechanism of the creation of the syntactic units and their function. At the very least, this project will encourage the research of the language from teachers' perspective and from that of the students. It will provide a platform (systematic teaching and learning) for both teacher and students on the topics, which were lost in the previous teaching system and have not been well studied. This approach is useful not only for heritage Kazakhs speakers, but also for non-native speakers of Kazakh language. Unfortunately, current teaching practices at the university level for heritage and non-native speakers of Kazakh continue to rely heavily on the structural (grammar based) teaching system. As a result, presentation of the syntax of the Kazakh language in textbooks remains fragmentary and haphazard. Students are confused and generally lose interest in learning the Kazakh language. To rectify this situation, materials will target not only non-native-speaker audiences, but will also be in demand by teachers and researchers in philological and Kazakh study programs.

This approach will bridge the current gap between new Kazakh language-teaching methodology and the existing textbooks/teaching materials. It will look to existing scholarly work on Kazakh linguistics and, in particular, FSF, to design a new series of textbooks for use in the school and university classroom. Thus, this research will simultaneously contribute to theoretical work on Kazakh language and bring those contributions from the scholarly world to the classroom.

Conclusion

We use the semantic-functional approach for teaching Kazakh language for heritage and non-native speakers. In so doing, we expect to reach the following results: (1) improve the logical and content relations of the language; (2) develop associative thinking skills and logical reasoning of language learners; (3) help find semantically close components and help students apply the language appropriately; and (4) build a teaching system taking into account the connection between different language units. This approach not only fits the study and teaching of the Kazakh language, but other languages, as well. This is because the functional-semantic approach captures universal characters of languages, which include the functional semantic usage based in every language.

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