Exploring uses of cognitive linguistic analysis of English conditionals in L2 pedagogical context

Natalia Jacobsen
Georgetown University

Due to their internal complexity, English conditional phrases (e.g., *"If it rains tomorrow, we will cancel the picnic"*; etc.) represent a major challenge for L2 learners. Moreover, most ESL grammar books lack precise explanations of conditional constructions as a category, relying largely on explanation of form rather than meaning, and ignoring conditional usage patterns in different contexts. In terms of traditional theoretical approaches, despite a great number of existing analyses, researchers have not presented a comprehensive, unified account of conditionals.

In contrast, cognitive linguistic research on conditionals (Dancygier, 1998; Dancygier and Sweetser, 2005) addresses the intrinsic complexity of conditional constructions and provides an analysis that highlights the essence of the phenomenon of conditionality, i.e., the conceptualization of two possible states, with one possible state linked to another possible state. The use of mental space theory employed by Dancygier and Sweetser (2005) allows us to explain how the speaker's perspective and corresponding tense markers (both influenced by discourse-specific contextual factors) produce different mental space configurations reflected in varying conditional forms.

In recent years, cognitive linguistic theory has been successfully applied to pedagogical contexts in regard to a large range of grammatical categories (Tyler, 2012). The hypothesis investigated in this study was that the application of a cognitive linguistic analysis of conditionals to classroom practices has the potential to provide L2 learners with a fuller and more accessible account of conditional meaning and its functions in multiple usage contexts. More specifically, a CL account, drawing on mental space theory, allows the phenomenon of conditionality to be broken down into a number of components that can be conveyed to L2 learners using visual representation, examples from authentic usage contexts and a minimum of grammatical terms.

In this study, elements of cognitive linguistic analysis of English hypothetical conditionals (e.g., "*If prices went up, I would sell my car,*" (Werth, 1997) from Dancygier and Sweetser (2005) were incorporated into L2 learning materials. The design of the study was quasi-experimental, with three groups (total N=57) participating: two treatment groups (cognitive and task-supported) and one control group that did not receive any instruction on conditionals. The research questions explored the efficacy of different types of instruction (cognitive and task-supported as opposed to task-supported alone) for the L2 development of English conditional phrases, as measured by a posttest and a delayed posttest. Introspective data were collected using the method of retrospective interview. *T*-test and ANOVA analyses were carried out to measure the progress made by subjects in acquisition of conditionals. Statistical findings (*p=0.001*) indicate that participants from the cognitive group outperformed the participants from the task-supported and control groups and demonstrated a higher degree of understanding of conditional usage contexts. Qualitative analysis of interview data showed that learners were engaged by the cognitive linguistic approach and its connection with visual presentation of grammar.

These findings support using cognitive linguistic analysis of English conditionals in L2 classrooms and suggest a number of ways that would make the adaptation of cognitive linguistic theory to practice most meaningful for language learners.

References

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