

THE INDIVIDUAL GRAMMAR APPROACH TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE: AN IDIOLECT-DRIVEN MODEL FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN INDEPENDENT SETTINGS

Wilmar Gentil López Barrios

Researcher, Instituto Caro y Cuervo,
Bogotá, Colombia. Doctoral student,
University of Massachusetts Amherst,
Amherst, Massachusetts.

Mailing address: 336 East Hadley
Road Amherst, MA 01002

E-mail: wlopezbarrio@umass.edu

Book title: *The Individual Grammar
Approach to Foreign Language: An
Idiolect-Driven Model for Foreign
Language Learners in Independent
Settings*

Author: Camilo Andrés Bonilla
Carvajal

Publisher: Universidad Distrital
Francisco José de Caldas

Year of publication: 2016

Number of pages: 116

ISBN: 978-958-8972-08-4

The process of learning any foreign language can be reduced to a single series of tasks: (a) finding out all the words inside one's brain; (b) translating those words into the target language; and (c) putting the translations back into one's brain.

As simplistic as it might sound, it is under this single assumption that the ten-chapter book written by Camilo Andrés Bonilla Carvajal manages to make a very persuasive point, though highly theoretical, on the most efficacious way to approach language learning in independent settings (outside the traditional classroom). His work brings an insightful and innovative method to autonomous learners, even to teacher-led classrooms, which should be welcomed by the literature of language acquisition at large, and, most importantly, by the national literature of bilingual education, inasmuch as we in Colombia lack enough theory-based sources to lead our practice and, accordingly, escape the dominant European/North American voices.

The pivotal focus of the book is the idiolect, the version of language that every speaker uses as an individual, and which is not present in the conceptual framework of language education (so the author claims) when it could well be a driving force for curriculum design, lesson planning, and goal setting in learning. Hence, the central objective of the book is to persuade learners and teachers of the critical role played by understanding and harnessing the full potential of the idiolect in speech production.

Bonilla Carvajal cogently expands the tenets of his idiolect-driven approach on a philosophical, theoretical, and experimental level. He opens with a thorough description of the background and rationale behind it, namely, *the Cátedra Gramática-Traducción* lecture series at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas from

519

Received: 2016-08-01 / Accepted: 2017-02-15
DOI: 10.17533/udea.ikala.v22n03a09

Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura

MEDELLÍN, COLOMBIA, VOL. 22, ISSUE 3 (SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER, 2017), pp. 519-521, ISSN 0123-3432
www.udea.edu.co/ikala

2010 to 2011. In line with other books in the field of linguistics, such as Saussure's lecture notes from his time at the University of Geneva (*Cours de linguistique générale*), Foucault's Collège de France lectures, Chomsky's 1981 *Lectures on Government and Binding: the Pisa Lectures*, or B.F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* —a deep influence in Carvajal's work— this volume was originally conceived as a sequence of self-contained conferences exploring the theoretical underpinnings of individual grammar theory.

In his justification the author expands the central concept of individual grammar as follows: "If there is an already established research program in theoretical linguistics addressing the universal computational properties shared by all humans to produce language (universal grammar), in the absence of studies addressing the potential use of the idiolect for language learning, that is, the individual properties that emerge in every human when producing language, a like program can, and should, be established." (Bonilla, 2016, p. 25)

The problem, statement and purpose of the study lay out the main questions and research objectives. A key observation is in order, however: although the book is published in a series called *Colección Didácticas* (Didactics Collection), the purpose seems to be decidedly theoretical. In the final sections some attention is indeed given to the pedagogical and instructional applications of the approach, but the bulk of the book lingers over its philosophical foundations and research program (the idiolect applied to language teaching); this undermines its practical value for the intended audience of the series.

The literature review, meanwhile, stands out as a well-crafted systematic analysis of the most relevant studies in translation in the context of language teaching, idiolect, learning strategies, syllabus design, as well as language policy and philosophy, which provides additional (yet only theoretical) support to the research program.

Next, the experimental section describes the approach as a process of "idiolect re-encoding," meaning the aforementioned three steps: (a) finding out all the words inside one's brain (e.g., using a voice recorder, the participants' speech is captured when they describe something); (b) translating those words into the target language (i.e., the foreign language); and (c) putting the translations back into one's brain (e.g., rehearsing the expressions and words to learn them). This methodology was carried out with a group of first year undergraduate English students, and a smaller group of independent language learners of different foreign languages (English, Spanish, Latin, German, Dutch, French and Afrikaans).

The study is thoroughly described amid plentiful arguments to support each and every research decision. The sections on instructional design, intervention, instructional objectives and activities for pedagogical intervention are constantly interwoven with dense references and further expansion of theoretical considerations, such as the author's own language theory, language acquisition, and conceptual constructs. There is even a general rule on language learning in independent settings, the inclusion of which makes the book an easier read because otherwise the prevalence of jargon and highly technical style of the writer (fittingly, his own unique idiolect) would render it inaccessible to the uninitiated.

Finally, a considerable section is devoted to activities for autonomous language learners, although they can also pertain to teachers: specific techniques on how to use a bilingual dictionary, authentic materials, time management, meta-learning, and even a schedule for idiolect-reconstruction (another buzzword for recording yourself and translating your idiolect). The book ends with data analysis, general conclusions, limitations and further pedagogical implications. Thankfully, a comprehensive glossary is also included at the end with all the new terms coined by the author,

because in order to grasp most of the content, a proper knowledge of verbal behavior analysis, as well as psycho- and neuro- linguistics are a must to gain a swift understanding of the overall theory.

The theoretical significance of the individual grammar approach will only be fully measured (if proven successful) by the actual impact it intends to make in applied linguistics. Furthermore, while not every must-read in a given scientific domain becomes an instant classic, *The Individual Grammar Approach* is a needed title that shares a thought-provoking message: What if the construction of a syllabus following the intuitions of teachers, school administrators, policymakers or international entities (e.g.,

the Common European Framework) is wrong, and a faster path is possible by considering what's inside the learner, that is, their idiolect?

This work sheds light on the need to conduct further research on the possibility of developing nonlinear syllabi, idiolect-driven classrooms and individual-led learning. The return to the individual, unlike the attention paid to the massification of didactic solutions, is the ultimate message of Bonilla Carvajal. He makes it clear from the opening with Wittgenstein's epigraph: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world," which echoes his own epilogue, "In foreign language, learning inwards... is the only way onwards."

How to reference this article: López Barrios, W. G. (2017). Book review: *The Individual Grammar Approach to Foreign Language. An Idiolect-Driven Model for Foreign Language Learners in Independent Settings*. *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura*, 22(3), 519-521. DOI: 10.17533/udea.ikala.v22n03a09