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**PROBLEMS  
AND  
PRINCIPLES**

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*Studies in the  
Teaching of English  
as a Second Language*

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**DAVID ABERCROMBIE**

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*Studies in the Teaching of English  
as a Second Language*

by

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*First published 1956*

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN  
BY WESTERN PRINTING SERVICES LTD BRISTOL

## PREFACE

I FIRST started to teach English as a second language twenty-five years ago, and since that time I have been able to learn something of the problems of learners of English from almost all parts of the world. In particular I have had many opportunities of discussing these problems with other language teachers, and the following chapters are based largely on lectures, given in England and abroad over the past fifteen years, to groups of foreign teachers of English. I am not concerned here to discuss the merits of the many English-teaching methods in existence today, and still less to advance any method of my own (I am, in fact, an adherent of Basic English); neither have I any strong point of view to put forward beyond the firm conviction that the theory (fashionable in some academic quarters) that written language is not really language at all is having an unfortunate influence on teaching theory and practice.

These chapters originally appeared during the years 1948-54 in *English Language Teaching*, published by the British Council, and I am grateful to the Editorial Board for permission to reprint them here. They are reproduced with some slight revision. An abridged version of Ch. IV was published in *Education To-day* in 1953, and it was also reprinted in full in *The Speech Teacher* (U.S.A.) in 1955.

I am also indebted to Messrs. Peter Davies Ltd. for permission to reproduce material from *Greek Salad* by Kenneth Matthews.

Edinburgh, 1956

DAVID ABERCROMBIE

## PREFACE

### NOTE

Phonetic symbols, which are those of the International Phonetic Association, are printed in bold type.

## CONTENTS

<i>Chap.</i>		<i>Page</i>
I.	LINGUISTICS AND THE TEACHER	i
II.	SOME FIRST PRINCIPLES	16
III.	TEACHING PRONUNCIATION	28
IV.	ENGLISH ACCENTS	41
V.	MAKING CONVERSATION	57
VI.	GESTURE	70
VII.	THE USE OF RECORDING	84



## I

# LINGUISTICS AND THE TEACHER

DETAILED knowledge of particular languages is a necessity for the language teacher; he must have full command of the language he is teaching, and at least a descriptive acquaintance with the language of the pupils or students being taught. Knowledge of the nature of language in general, on the other hand, is not a necessity, but it is certainly a very useful adjunct to his equipment. Although general linguistics is a very theoretical study, important practical consequences for teaching can follow from its speculations.

General linguistics is partly concerned with the problem of *what language does*; that is, with the *functions* of any and every language. It is also concerned with *what languages are*, how they may best be analysed, described, compared, and classified; in other words, with the *form* of *different* languages. It is what language does, however, that the teacher would do well to consider first. An exhaustive survey would be well beyond the scope of the present work, but I should like to suggest five aspects from which language, in its relation to man, society, and the world, can be considered.

## I

First, language makes it possible for individuals to live in a society. It is characteristic of, indeed fundamental to, the modern point of view in linguistics to regard language as a *social* activity rather than as a means of

*individual* self-expression. 'Speech is the instrument of society,' as Ben Jonson said; there is a very close connection between the two facts that man is a speaking animal, and that he is the social animal *par excellence*. The definition of language as 'a means of communicating thoughts' is nowadays commonly held to be, as a partial truth, more misleading than illuminating; a more fruitful definition is that language is *a means of social control*.

It is true, of course, that language does communicate thoughts, but many—perhaps most—of its uses cannot really be said to involve this. When an order is given to a squad of soldiers by an officer, no thought has first to be interpreted and then acted upon; the response is as automatic as the appearance of light when a switch is pressed. This is a simple example of a normally more complicated process: the use of language to co-ordinate activities. Any co-operative effort carried out by a number of people skilled in that operation depends entirely for its unity and success on language, though that language will not be communicating thoughts. Anybody who, with this aspect of language in mind, has watched a team of piano movers negotiating a tricky staircase with a grand piano, has received an object lesson on speech-in-action.

There are other uses of language which are not concerned with the communication of thoughts. The conversations which English people hold about the weather, for example, do not as a rule leave the participants any the wiser; only on rare occasions can information be said to have been exchanged. As far as communicating thought is concerned, they get nowhere; are they then quite pointless? No; a little reflection will show that this kind of use of language also has great social value.

Most peoples have a feeling that a silent man is a dangerous man. Even if there is nothing to say, one must



talk, and conversation puts people at their ease and in harmony with one another. This sociable use of language has been given the name *phatic communion*. The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski invented the term, 'actuated' he said, 'by the demon of terminological invention'; and although he was half in joke, the name has stuck. Malinowski defined it as 'a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words.' It enters the everyday experience of everybody, from the most highly civilized to the most primitive, and, far from being useless, this small-talk is essential to human beings getting along together at all.

The actual sense of the words used in phatic communion matters little; it is facial expression and intonation that are probably the important things. It is said that Dorothy Parker, alone and rather bored at a party, was asked 'How are you? What have you been doing?' by a succession of distant acquaintances. To each she replied, 'I've just killed my husband with an axe, and I feel fine.' Her intonation and expression were appropriate to party small-talk, and with a smile and a nod each acquaintance, unastonished, drifted on.

Although the sense matters little, however, certain subjects only are reserved for use in phatic communion, and these chosen subjects differ widely among different peoples. Each of the following questions is, in some part of the world, good form when meeting a person:

How are you?

Where are you from?

How much money do you earn?

What is your name?

What do you know?

Some of them, however, would cause deep offence when used in other parts of the world, though in each

case the replies required, and expected, are purely formal.

A knowledge of the spoken form of any language must include knowledge of its conventions of phatic communion. Conversation is impossible unless one is equipped with meaningless phrases for use when there is nothing to say, and the teacher dealing with advanced students will take care to give them command of the necessary formulas and the rules governing their use.

Grace de Laguna, in her excellent book *Speech: Its Function and Development* (1927), said, 'men do not speak simply to relieve their feelings or to air their views, but to awaken a response in their fellows and to influence their attitudes and acts.' The profoundly social character of language should constantly be borne in mind by the language teacher.

## II

But language has a very individual side also: 'language' (to quote Ben Jonson once again) 'most shows a man: speak, that I may see thee.'

When a person speaks, a listener interprets what he says as, simultaneously, two quite different and separate systems of signs. An utterance consists of *symbols* referring to whatever is being talked about; but it is also at the same time an *index* to various things about the speaker, particularly his personality. These two systems of signs are quite independent of each other. In a similar way things such as gait, or the wearing of clothes, can, in addition to their main function, reveal personality; but probably no aspect of human behaviour does this so constantly or so subtly as speech. It is especially the least conscious parts of talking—pronunciation, general handling of the voice, gesture—which are the vehicle of these

clues to personality. Almost everyone, when meeting a stranger, bases an immediate judgment on the way he or she talks; and we can often infer from their speech, when meeting people known to us, whether they are in a bad temper, or feeling well-disposed.

It is not always easy to say how present to consciousness these interpretations are. Sometimes it is only on careful reflection that an attitude taken up towards someone can be traced to his voice and pronunciation; at other times we are fully conscious of the effect of someone's voice on us. It is not always easy to say, either, to what extent the speaker intends that certain judgments should be made. There may be completely conscious control, as when an Egyptian hopes to arouse feelings of respect towards himself by introducing into his speech consonants such as *q*, *θ*, which do not normally occur in the spoken Arabic of Egypt. At the other extreme is the epileptic who betrays this fact to the skilled ear by his intonation, but is as unable to get rid of the features which give him away as the malingerer is to assume them.

Judgments concerning a person made on the basis of his speech may, or may not, of course, be correct. Wrong judgments are particularly apt to be made on foreigners. It is likely, for example, that English assertions concerning the excitability of Frenchmen are founded on the fact that certain features of the speech of normal Frenchmen are closely similar to features of excitable Englishmen's speech.<sup>1</sup> Americans, again, often accuse Englishmen of superciliousness: normal English intonation closely resembles the intonation adopted by supercilious Americans. However, speech is often an astonishingly sure guide to personality, and one, more-

<sup>1</sup> Differences in gesture habits may also influence this judgment (see p. 73).

over, which requires very remarkable delicacy of perception, of which most people seem to be capable.

Not only are certain features of speech an index to personality; they may sometimes be very strongly felt as a *part* of personality, and the language teacher should be prepared to encounter this. The inability of an intelligent pupil to acquire a reasonable pronunciation may not be due to a bad ear; the pupil may be resisting the attack on his personality which he (unconsciously) feels is involved in any attempt to change his pronunciation habits. The wise teacher will handle such a situation with care.

Possibly something similar lies behind the conviction in some countries that the presence of foreign words in the language is a menace to the national consciousness. Such a feeling has never, fortunately, been effective in this country, but elsewhere it has on more than one occasion given rise to legislation. There is little chance that the English will ever substitute 'folkwain' for 'omnibus,' but the Germans have been persuaded to say *Fernsprecher* for 'telephone'. 'Man lebt in seiner Sprache,' said a Nazi poet.

### III

Thirdly, forms of speech delimit social groupings, or classes, within a language community. When people congregate in a group they tend to behave in a similar way, and this similarity in behaviour, in so far as it is different from the behaviour of others, then becomes one of the factors which characterise, and so preserve, the group. Speech behaviour is deeply affected in this way: 'one may wonder', wrote Edward Sapir, 'if there is any set of social habits that is more cohesive or more disrupting than language habits.'

Pronunciation is perhaps the most obvious point

where speech behaviour is influenced by social groupings, but any feature of language may be involved. We have probably all been misleadingly taught in school that the French word *tu* is distinguished from *vous* by being employed only when the person addressed is intimately known, or is decidedly inferior—a dog or child. *Tu* is, certainly, employed on these occasions; but that is not the real clue to its use, and does not explain how, for example, one Frenchman could say to another on being introduced ‘*Enchanté de faire ta connaissance.*’ The fact is that *tu* is regularly used, not as a sign of *personal* familiarity, but between members of certain social groups, political parties, and so on; and may often be used, therefore, between complete strangers.

The role of language in social differentiation helps to explain an otherwise puzzling phenomenon—the existence of slang. Slang is a matter almost entirely of vocabulary. It is to be distinguished from *jargon*, the technical terminology of occupations and sports: the cricketer’s *in-swing*, *yorker*, *wrong ’un*, *late cut*; the radio engineer’s *mike*, *top*, *level*, *fade*. These are practically necessities, which it would be most awkward to do without. Slang is to be distinguished also from *cant*, concealed or secret language. Used mainly by the card-sharper, the confidence trickster, the pickpocket, to escape conflict with the law, cant too is a necessity. But slang is puzzling because it merely duplicates the conventional vocabulary, does not seem to be in any way necessary, and can cover almost any topic.

One powerful impulse to the creation of slang is boredom with outworn locutions, and the desire to be expressive and vivid; which is why it is nearly always picturesque and sometimes in doubtful taste. But its real explanation lies in the fact that it is always the property of a group; its use proclaims membership of that group

and distinction from other groups. As a versifier has put it:<sup>1</sup>

The chief use of slang  
Is to show that you're one of the gang.

Slang is fascinating to foreigners, and acquirement of it seems to promise admission to the real intimacies of communication. As a learner of languages I have felt the fascination myself, and have often observed it in my students. Learning how, or rather *when*, to use slang is, however, a tricky business. Foreign students have on several occasions confided to me that they have met with signs of discomfort—even hostility—when they have proudly introduced their carefully acquired slang into conversation with English students. The reaction seemed inexplicable to them. The probable explanation, however, is that they had unwittingly claimed a social intimacy to which they were not entitled, producing an effect like that of misplaced *tutoyage*; or possibly they had given the appearance of flaunting the slang of a hostile group. It may, moreover, be the case that no type of slang is compatible with a foreign accent.

A certain amount of slang usually appears in courses of 'colloquial' English, and some people have recommended teaching, even in the early stages of a language, a few chosen expressions. These are, of course, gratifying to learners—'they use them with roguish aptness', says one author—and therefore useful pedagogically. Nevertheless it is a dubious expedient. Not only are complex social problems involved, but there is another difficulty: slang is ephemeral. The very impulses which give rise to it ensure that it will be short-lived. The new vivid expression will itself become as worn-out and

<sup>1</sup> In a competition in *The New Statesman and Nation*; see the issue for 16 November 1946. The entry was signed "R.D.C."



boring as those it has replaced. It may also spread outside the group and cease therefore to be a badge of membership, particularly if the group has considerable prestige (a common fate of R.A.F. slang). A very few slang words attain respectability, as have English *mob*, *queer*, French *tête*, German *Kopf*, but most old slang is distasteful:

When it dates,  
It grates,

as the versifier continued. Nothing can be more embarrassing than roguish inaptness.

#### IV

Language not only brings human beings into relationship with each other, it also brings them into relationship with the external world. Language mediates between man and his environment.

The naïve, or common-sense, view is that language *reflects* the world and our thinking about it; that to the categories of language correspond categories of the real world. Modern linguistics, however, inclines to the view that language is not a passive reflection of, but rather an active practical approach to, the world—a sorting out of it for the purpose of acting on it. Experience is dissected, split up, along lines laid down by language, not necessarily along lines laid down by nature.

The way in which the vocabulary of a language is organized to deal with the outside world may conveniently be called its *lexical structure*. If it is not imposed by nature, there is no reason to expect that languages will be identical in lexical structure. We are all inclined to look on the categories of our own language as inevitable, but a comparison of even closely related

languages reveals surprising differences, and wide divergencies appear between languages of very distant families.

For example, the words of a language can be arranged at various *levels* of generality. The difference between *table, chair, cushion* is not the same as the difference between *table, furniture, object*: the first three are clearly at the same level, the second three at different levels.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most obvious variations in lexical structure occur here. An urban Englishman is content with the fairly general word *weed*; there are tribes of American Indians, however, for whom the medicinal properties of all plants are most important, who possess no such general term but will always refer to any specimen by its specific name. The English word *snow* does not seem to us very general, but it is more so than the several (unrelated) words which an Eskimo uses in its place, and by which he specifies snow in various states which are, to him, sensuously and operationally different.

It is often thought that the possession of words at the specific level enables a language to be more precise, but this is not necessarily so. Since we have in English the word *tail*, we gain nothing in precision from the word *scut*. *Scut* may be more *concise* than *tail of a rabbit*, but it is not more *precise*.

The distribution at different levels of the vocabulary of a given language has to some extent, probably, been governed by chance; it is difficult to think of any reason why the English *finger, thumb, toe* can all be called δάκτυλος in modern Greek. A considerable influence, however, is exercised by the practical interest of a people in the elements of their environment. The more necessary it is, for their way of life, to make distinctions within a range of phenomena, the less likely they are to possess

<sup>1</sup> See L. W. Lockhart, *Word Economy* (1931).

a general term covering the range as a whole; the more indifferent culturally the range, the more probable an all-embracing term. A highly developed language such as English, used all over the world by peoples of widely different cultural interests, can provide *if necessary* both general and specific terms on most subjects: if the urban Englishman wishes to be more specific than *weed*, he has only to look the appropriate word up. Similarly a Greek, if he must specify *thumb*, can resort to the literary *ἀντίχειρ*. Nevertheless, the lexical structure of the highly developed languages of the world is capricious in certain places. English lacks an equivalent for the German *Geschwister* (though the recently introduced *sibling* will now fill the gap when it is necessary to do so). We can talk about our *cousins* without specifying their sex, though the French cannot.

In addition to differences in the organization of vocabulary into levels, languages may vary in the isolation, or delimitation, of the elements of environment. Colour names provide a striking example of this. Every language, apparently, divides the spectrum differently, however close superficial correspondence may seem. There are dialects of English in which the word *foot* includes all of the leg below the knee. The Greek word *χέρι* covers the arm from elbow to fingertips, though it is usually translated "hand."

Language enables man to live in society, but the *kind* of society in which he lives will profoundly affect his language. Lexical structure and social structure are intimately connected, and it is here that the most serious difficulties for the language learner are probably to be found. A language is not only part of the cultural achievement of a people, it also transmits the rest of their culture system, and English words such as *gentleman*, *respectable*, *genteel*, *shy*, *whimsical*, *sophisticated*,