

# **The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching**

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# The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching

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## Introduction

In recent years, numerous circumstances have contributed to a great upsurge of interest in the teaching of English; and one is struck, particularly in connection with English as a second language, not only by the scale of current activity, but by the very varied needs which a knowledge of English is increasingly required to meet. A good deal will be said about these things in the latter part of this book. During the same recent period, though for reasons which are in part different, much time and energy have been devoted to the study of questions which have to do with the way language 'works', as distinct from the way a given language might best be taught.

These two broadly contrasting approaches interconnect, and it is the main business of this book to show how they do so. Or perhaps we should say, to show how they *should* do so, for though there is no doubt of their interconnection, nor of their already having interacted in many profitable ways, we must recognize at the outset that such interaction as there has been has in general taken place in a rather haphazard fashion. It is necessary to say something about why this is so, and to consider the ways in which the two kinds of approach may be more solidly integrated. This theme will be found to run through most of the present volume.

The somewhat uncomfortable and maladjusted partnership between these approaches is not surprising. For one thing, many of those interested more in the theoretical side of the linguistic sciences have had, and reasonably so, little or no direct concern with the teaching of particular languages. They have been more occupied with such matters as studying this or that aspect of one or more

languages simply for the sake of finding out more about the nature of language. Or they may have been interested in preserving for posterity some knowledge of a dying language which there was little or no question of anyone wishing to learn to speak. Moreover, much work has gone into languages of the past, such as Latin, where the problems of learning are of course very different from those which confront us when we consider the teaching of contemporary English.

On the other side, the long-established tradition of teaching people a living language, whether it be their mother tongue or not, has proceeded all over the world. It is important to recognize that this tradition, in its various forms, has usually succeeded in attaining at least its main objectives. And whether we like it or not, this has sometimes, indeed often, been so even when the tradition has been grounded only in the most rudimentary and sketchy way in any of the principles which would now have the approval of students of the linguistic sciences. In recent times, language teaching, particularly the teaching of English as a second language, has become what we might describe as big business. But this has not removed by any means all the imperfections of its foundations. For in the rapid expansion of the subject there has, almost necessarily, been no very carefully thought out plan of operations. Both in basic theory and in immediate practice the whole evolution of the subject has been rather unsystematic. The result is that many kinds of method (not all deserving of this label) co-exist, and their merits differ enormously. As we shall try to show, and wish to emphasize at the outset, this has had a bearing not only on the teaching of English as a second language but on the way such teaching has been handled in English-speaking countries.

The Second World War gave a special impetus to certain kinds of crash-programme teaching of a large number of languages, because for example German or Russian or Japanese (see p. 174) had to be acquired, for various purposes, in a hurry. A great deal was learnt from these emergency activities. Meanwhile, however, the war for the most part, at least in many places, impeded rather than furthered progress in the more normal and conventional programmes of language teaching. Even in the intervening period it is only here and there that most of the discoveries which resulted from the emergency projects have had any marked effect on these normal programmes. Indeed we must face the fact that in many places the teaching of modern languages, including English, at various levels,

still goes on in a way which could scarcely be distinguished from that which was current forty or fifty years ago.

It has already been noted—and this is an important and complicating aspect of the whole approach to the improvement of language-teaching methods—that there is not in operation, except in the vaguest sense, any generally current and accepted body of theory, or system of practice. Instead we have numerous different kinds of approach, varying greatly in degree of sophistication, some of them long-established and conservative, some of them quite recent. Those of the more antiquated (which does not necessarily mean the same thing as ‘long-established’) kind die hard, and for very good reasons. Traditional methods of approach (as in almost any subject) are notoriously difficult to eradicate or seriously modify. Apart from anything else it is frequently argued, and often with some justification, that the alleged antiquated approaches at least produce positive results, and that there is no guarantee that anything more ‘modern’ or ‘scientific’, especially in the hands of those trained in and accustomed to some earlier way of setting about things, would produce anything better. Furthermore, it is often maintained that many of the latest and allegedly most up-to-date kinds of approach are in fact half-baked and therefore distinctly inferior to others they purport to supersede. Or that, though theoretically admirable, they are wildly impractical. The fact that such contentions are often justified does not lighten the task of those who try to make some real contribution to the development of the subject. We should note as an additional relevant factor that linguists are often unwilling to devote the time and effort necessary to explain fully why they believe their science can be useful and to take the trouble to discuss in detail just how it can be so.

The argument that new approaches are, for such reasons, dangerous or undesirable or unnecessary is naturally not accepted in the present volume. However, it is recognized that the mere unsupported recommendation of new theoretical or practical approaches is only a small part of the battle which must be fought to bring about real progress. It is necessary to show at some considerable length—and this is part of what will be attempted in succeeding chapters—*how* and *why* such new approaches are calculated to be helpful and useful. And to do this at all adequately it is necessary to face squarely the very complicated issues which confront us when we really go into the matters that are involved in the business of

teaching a language, whether native or foreign. In other words, we must first show how ramified are the problems, both theoretical and practical, which are bound to arise if the subject is taken with due seriousness. Something of this sort is attempted at many points in this book. In all this we certainly do not overlook a matter which is often allowed to obscure the issue: how much a gifted teacher may achieve even without a very adequate basis of reference. This is not at any point in question. Our contention is simply that with a better framework he can almost certainly achieve even more in a given time; a serious attempt is therefore made to show why it is that some frameworks are better than others.

It is not the purpose of this volume to supply a series of neat answers to all questions relating to theory or practice. The main intention is rather to raise the kind of questions which must be properly apprehended as a first and necessary move towards finding solutions to problems. But it also tries to present certain up-to-date views about the nature of language and about English in particular. In the early chapters a good deal is said about the fundamental disciplines of linguistics and phonetics and about how, using them, it is possible to describe how a language 'works'. There is a problem here which is frequently raised: how far does the practical teacher of English need to be a master of these disciplines? Here we must distinguish between various kinds of knowledge. Certainly an understanding of the aims and objectives of these approaches is greatly to be desired; this is something quite different from an ability to handle by oneself totally new problems of a linguistic or phonetic kind. Given some such perception of the general aims and objectives of these disciplines, it should thereafter become apparent that certain of them have a special relevance to problems of language teaching. All one can usefully say about these is that the more knowledge and understanding a practising teacher has of them the better. For it is the techniques associated with these which either are, or can be 'converted' into, valuable procedural and expository tools, and will thus provide the teacher with a new perception of the resources available to him for dealing with some of his difficulties.

In all this we are particularly concerned with certain special applications of linguistic and phonetic knowledge and insights. We may regard these applications as having three somewhat different targets or 'customers'. We have spoken so far of the teacher and his special needs. But, secondly, perhaps even more broadly and critic-

ally important is that these applications should be clearly perceived and understood by writers of textbooks of various kinds. For, as we shall suggest, the nature and quality of textbooks exerts a very powerful influence on the way the subject as a whole can develop. Finally, an attempt has been made to keep in mind those other readers whose administrative business it is to encourage and develop the disciplines relevant to English language teaching; in putting some of the major problems in perspective, we have therefore tried to do so in a way which may provide ammunition for those who are striving to put the subject on a proper footing. With these three kinds of reader in mind, a fairly systematic attempt is made to show the kinds of relevance which linguistic and phonetic theory have to a wide range of language-teaching problems.

There is gradually accumulating a large body of 'applied theory' to which reference is made in the Bibliography. Since such works exist, it may be asked why there is any need for a book like the present one, which places a good deal of emphasis on the underlying theory that lies behind such applications. The reasons should be fairly clear. First of all, the validity of such applications can scarcely be understood without such a background: the reliability of a book, say on the phonetics of English, cannot be assessed merely on the basis of its degree of fidelity to 'the facts' about English sounds. For the theoretical grounds for selecting, isolating and ordering these so-called facts in a certain way are also of the greatest importance, and for us to assess them we must have some knowledge of what phonetics and related studies are attempting to achieve and how they are setting about this. Secondly, and rather differently, when (as so frequently happens) some perfectly reputable piece of 'applied theory' is presented baldly, without preamble or explanation, it is often rather mystifying to the reader who wishes to make practical use of it. He will tend to wonder what are the reasons for it being what it is, and not something different, e.g. such as he himself may have been more accustomed to hitherto. It may well not be mere new terminology which bothers him, but the very system or method which the terminology partly embodies. Hence the attention which is devoted in this book to the theoretical justifications of certain approaches as against others, and to some explanation of their practical relevance.

One might say that these justifications divide themselves into two kinds. In the first place we have the kind which consists, at least to



begin with, of calling attention to the complexity of language in order to show that a body of theory which is itself of considerable complexity and sophistication is required to enable us, for any serious purpose, to marshal in due order the great number of relevant items of information about the language we are seeking to teach. In other words it must be shown that language is not simple, and therefore that language teaching not only deserves but needs the best equipment with which linguistic theory can provide it. Not that this is all that it deserves or needs; the reader will discover that it is *not* claimed that such equipment is in itself sufficient, for nothing of this kind will replace good teaching or wholly make up for bad. Secondly, having said something about the complexity of language, it is necessary to go on to say something in detail about the different kinds of theory, or different parts of some general theory, and just how applications thereof can enable us to handle the various problems which crop up in a comprehensive language-teaching course.

Much could be said here about the numerous features of a language which many conventional grammars, even the larger ones, tend to ignore or slide hastily over. And one cannot but feel that in many cases this is not so much because the author considers them to be unimportant as that he simply lacks any adequate means of expounding them. In other instances, of course, one gets grave distortions of linguistic phenomena; here, as often as not, the author will be unaware that there is anything at all wrong with his techniques. For reasons of this kind it thus often comes about that what is 'conveyed' in grammars, dictionaries and kindred works is but a dim emasculated version of the language itself; more is said on this question in Chapter 6. It must be emphasized that this is much the more serious because it is rare for any modest hint of it to be conveyed anywhere in such works.

With such books in classroom use, it can be no more than a matter of chance whether a given teacher will have the experience and knowledge to make up for the graver of their deficiencies. Besides, even the best teacher will often have nothing more satisfactory to which he himself can go for enlightenment or guidance. In any case a good teacher should have better things to do than spend his valuable time trying to make up for any such inadequacies of textbooks; where these can be averted, they certainly should be. We have already suggested that it must inevitably be the case,

broadly speaking, that the nature of the textbooks which are available to the teacher and to the class will have a profound effect on the way instruction is carried out. The writers of textbooks carry therefore a heavy weight of responsibility. The present volume might in part be described as a reminder to them, as well as to those who select and prescribe textbooks, of the seriousness of their tasks. Nor should we forget that these tasks are never-ending; as theories develop so must applications thereof be re-expounded, and books continually re-evaluated.

From another point of view, it is hoped that what is said in this book will serve a useful purpose in making such readers of it as are users of textbooks more critically demanding of their rightful due, and unwilling to accept anything second-rate. Much could be learnt about the place of linguistics and phonetics in English language teaching simply by scrutinizing run-of-the-mill textbooks and trying to establish how far certain theoretical deficiencies are responsible for making them less satisfactory, for their particular practical purposes, than they might otherwise have been. This does not mean, of course, that they could not profitably be scrutinized for defects of other kinds as well.

Something on similar lines might be said here about examinations. For if, as we have suggested, teaching programmes are to a considerable extent controlled by textbooks, it is also true to say that they are in another way controlled by such examinations as they are designed to lead towards. The extent to which examinations are themselves controlled by textbooks is a difficult problem. But, later on (see especially p. 215), enough will be conveyed, directly and by implication, to suggest how often examinations are unrealistic and unsatisfactory in their demands, whatever the reasons. Sometimes the skills they purport to be testing are simply not those which they should be testing. Furthermore, there is sometimes only a faint resemblance between these skills they purport to be testing and the skills (if that is the proper word) which they really do test. Examination papers, like textbooks, could therefore well be examined from the point of view of basic theoretical (as well as practical) deficiencies. If good examination techniques are not achieved, then advances in teaching techniques and in textbooks will have only a small fraction of their desired effects. The further problem of devising and implementing satisfactory syllabuses is of course intimately linked with the problem of adequate examining.

It is not suggested that the shortcomings of certain textbooks or examinations will all turn out to be because of weak theoretical foundations, any more than it is suggested that adequate basic theory is the single and final solution to language-teaching problems as a whole. Later in this volume various other relevant matters of a more *methodological* kind are considered, and stress is laid on the difference between theory as such and the ways in which, for teaching purposes, we may choose to apply or expound it. The reader should perhaps be reminded here, concerning the advocacy both of particular theories and particular methods, that it is often not possible to establish or claim with any certainty that one is better than all possible others. He must also be prepared to face the fact that quite similar theories may sometimes, in different books, be disguised by discrepant or contrasting terminologies; and still worse that, in other cases, the use of similar terms in two different books conceals the fact that the theories are not in fact at all alike.

What is important in all this is the development of an open, critical and vigilant frame of mind; it is hoped that the following chapters will bring out much more, but they will not have entirely failed of their purpose if they achieve this alone. We can at least hope to convey the fact that, though one may not always be able to pronounce in favour of one theory, or one methodological approach, as against another, it is nevertheless usually possible to advance very good arguments indeed in favour of either as against some third, about which it is obvious, once we look into the matter, that it is inferior or worthless.

A good deal is said in the course of this book about the many respects in which we still have a somewhat inadequate analytical knowledge of the English language, despite its having been more intensively studied than most other languages. And stress is laid, at many points, on the way theoretical advances are continually being made. This may seem rather daunting to the reader who is interested in the specific and concrete problems of applying theory and imparting knowledge not about linguistics but about a language. How much more comfortable it would be if these things stayed still and did not have to be continually re-assessed and re-interpreted. But the very complexity of this situation has suggested its remedy. One of the most encouraging of recent developments has been that of what is now coming to be called applied linguistics. The specialist

in this subject is a kind of middleman who exists to bridge the gap between theory and newly acquired knowledge on the one hand and the everyday problems of teaching a language on the other. One may hope that by this process of mediation there will be no possibility in the future of the two end points—linguistics and language teaching—not being fruitfully and harmoniously linked to their common advantage.

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# Symbols

## GRAMMATICAL

	sentence boundary
	clause boundary
	group boundary
(space)	word boundary
+	morpheme boundary or fusion of morphemes
[ ]	boundary of rankshifted clause
[ ]	boundary of rankshifted group
(( ))	boundary of included clause

## PHONOLOGICAL

//	tone group boundary	// 1 etc.	tone (1-5, with sub-divisions, e.g. 1+, 4; and combinations, e.g. 13)
/	foot boundary		
(space)	syllable boundary		
i u ə	vowel prosody	/ ^	foot with silent beat
		...	pause (silence that interrupts rhythm)

// (enclose) specimen of phonological transcription not assigned to any unit

Tonic syllables are printed in **boldface**, e.g. **looking**

One alphabetical symbol, other than those raised, represents one phoneme

## PHONETIC

[ ] (enclose) phonetic symbols when they appear in isolation in the text, e.g. [b], [g], [θ], [ʃ], [ŋ], [i], [ɔ], [ə]

The symbols are those of the International Phonetic Alphabet (alphabet of the International Phonetic Association)

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Part 1

# The Linguistic Sciences



