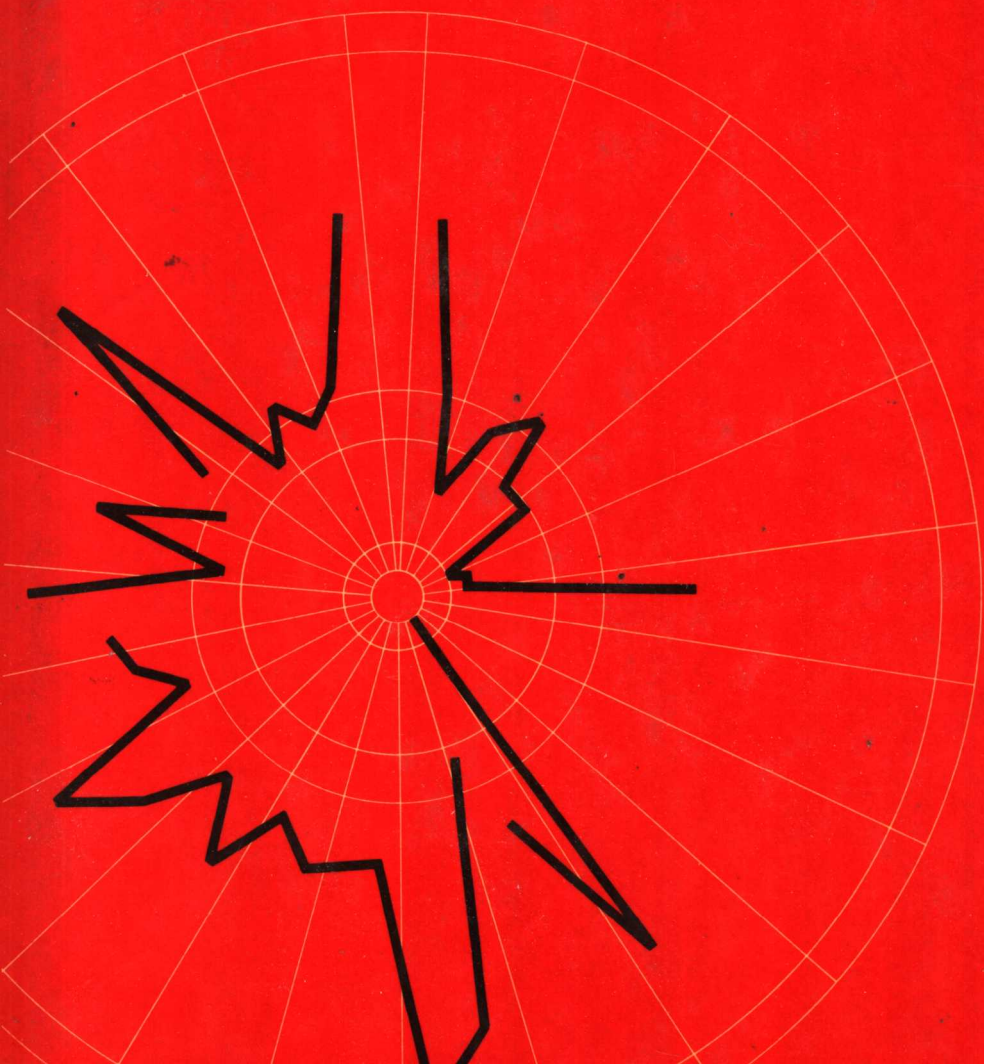


Language Teaching Analysis

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Language Teaching Analysis

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LANGUAGE TEACHING ANALYSIS

Preface

Problems before being solved must first be analysed. The more complex the problem, the more is its solution dependent on a sound analysis.

Language teaching includes some of the most complex problems in the field of education. This book is an attempt, not to solve them, but to analyse them for those who are concerned with their solution. It is addressed to language teachers, teachers-in-training, school inspectors, local education authorities, and researchers. It therefore has the following uses :

1. To provide students with an analytic introduction to the entire field.
2. To present language teachers with an analytic view of language teaching, to suggest ways of examining and comparing the tools they use, their grammars, dictionaries and textbooks, and to encourage them to check their teaching techniques.
3. To assist school inspectors in their analysis of the language teaching which they supervise.
4. To help the language teaching committees of local education authorities to analyse and select textbooks and materials.
5. To serve as a framework for discussions on language teaching, and to delimit problems for research.

The book is designed as an integrated whole ; but it is presented in such a way that each of its three main parts may be read independently.

Although examples are chosen mainly from the most usually taught foreign languages—English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and Italian—the principles they illustrate apply to the teaching of any foreign language. Since the book is written in English, most of the examples are from that language ; for it has been assumed that anyone able to read the book will also be able to understand the examples.

In the body of the text, a small, raised number refers to a work listed under that number in the bibliography. Where there is a colon as well, the number following the colon is the page number in the book cited.

The bibliography is meant as a systematic guide to works in the various divisions of the field delimited by the chapter headings. It is not intended as a complete bibliography on language teaching. The aim has been to include most of the general works in the field and some of the more important ones in different branches of linguistics not usually incorporated in

Preface

language teaching bibliographies. Those interested in bibliographies of special topics for term papers, reading lists, etc., should first consult the topical outline which precedes the actual list of works. This gives the contents, divisions and subdivisions of the bibliography and the numbers of the books included under each head. For more detailed studies and for reports of experiments, the reader is referred to the special bibliographies listed. No specific language-teaching courses were included in the bibliography, and those referred to in the text are anonymously labelled by means of letters, since the purpose of the book is not to favour one course over another, but to explain and illustrate a theory and technique of objective study in the hope that this may perhaps help encourage language teachers to consider language teaching as a matter not of allegiance but of analysis.

This book has been a long time in the making. During the past twenty years I have attempted in vain to read all of the vast literature in the field. Although I found most of it rather unrewarding as regards the analysis of language teaching, I did profit a great deal from the experience. I also benefited greatly from discussions with language teachers and teacher-trainers in many different parts of the world. Let me here thank all of them for what they may directly or indirectly have contributed.

I am particularly grateful, however, to those who have read the manuscript of my work. I wish first of all to express my sincere gratitude to Henri Frei, to Samuel Roller, and to Félix Kahn for having patiently read the entire manuscript in a number of versions and for having supplied valuable criticism and detailed suggestions for improving the work.

I owe a separate debt of thanks to each of those specialists who were good enough to read individual chapters—to A. V. P. Elliott, J. C. Catford, M. A. K. Halliday, G. Herdan, W. E. Lambert, E. Ingram, J. Darbelnet, and G. L. Bursill-Hall. And finally to Ilonka Schmidt for having given her time and skill to the checking of the proofs, at all stages, I offer my sincere thanks. I must assume full responsibility, however, for errors of any sort which may have crept into the text.

Geneva, July 1961

W. F. M.

Introduction

This study is a first approximation to a theory and technique of language teaching analysis. It is intended as a step in the evaluation of language teaching methods, in the investigation of the claims and counter-claims of conflicting schools, and in the delimitation of some of the century-old controversies in language teaching.

That such controversies have not yet been resolved is one of the causes of the periodical swing of language teaching opinion from one extreme to the other, a vacillation deplored long ago by scholars like Sweet ^{1274:31} and Palmer, ^{1245:19} since it makes language teaching a matter of fad and fashion, a matter of opinion rather than of fact.

Attempts since the end of the nineteenth century to resolve these conflicts by means of experimentation have as yet resolved none of them. ¹³¹⁸⁻²⁰ For when analysed, most of these experiments prove to have little significance. This is not only because they applied to particular situations with extremely limited data subjectively interpreted, but also because so many variables were left uncontrolled, tests unstandardized and quite inadequate, experiments never verified by duplication, and above all, because the problems investigated had never been properly defined.

After going over the vast literature of the period, we cannot help but agree with the conclusions of Agard and Dunkel, in the survey connected with their investigation of language learning, that most of the opinions had been based on unverified results of personal experience resting on home-made and mostly invalid tests, reporting that students have done "some-one's idea of well on someone's idea of an adequate test" as Dunkel has put it. ^{951:168} The results obtained in such tests may have been due to the causes suggested, or to a number of other variables on which no evidence is given. In other words, we are forced to the conclusion that the great majority of these past experiments were invalid as experiments.

Yet, even if these studies had been quite valid as experiments, they could not have constituted an adequate evaluation of the conflicting methods used in teaching languages. The very idea that such conflicts can be solved by experimentation is highly questionable. Yet this idea is immensely popular; as one educational official recently explained to the author, "It's very simple to find out which is the better method. Simply test the results." This fallacy of evaluating methods by the results of their teaching is as

Introduction

common as that of evaluating the teaching by the method used. A method is one thing; the teaching of it, quite another. Good teaching is no guarantee of good learning; for it is what the learner does that makes him learn. Poor learning can nullify the best teaching, just as poor teaching can devalue the best method. Analysing one in terms of the other is bound to lead to error.

Here we are chiefly concerned with the factors involved in language teaching, and only with language learning to the extent that it is a factor in theories of language teaching and language analysis. Good teaching must take the learning process into account since its very purpose is to promote good learning; but the one can and does exist without the other. They must therefore first be analysed separately, for each contains its own complex of factors.

In the analysis of language teaching, it is essential to maintain a distinction between the method and the teaching of it, without forgetting the obvious relationship between them—since one of the purposes of a language teaching method is to direct the teaching of the language.

A second distinction has to be made between the language and the method, between the description of the language as presented in grammars and dictionaries and the way this material is used in a particular language teaching method. Again it is important not to forget the relationship between both. All language teaching methods must be based on some knowledge of and about the language to be taught. The more that is known about the language, the more complete the method may become. But there are different ways of finding out about a language and of describing what it is made of; many of the differences rest on different ideas of what a language is.

We therefore have three distinct but related fields of inquiry: I Language, II Method, and III Teaching.

I LANGUAGE

Language teaching is influenced by ideas on the nature of language in general, by ideas on the particular language being taught, and by ideas on how the language is learned. A theory of language teaching analysis must therefore begin with a study of how ideas on language may differ (language theory), on different ways of finding out what a particular language is made of (language description), how it differs from the native language (language differences), and on differences in ideas of how a language is learned (language learning).

Differences in language theory affect language teaching in two ways. They may affect the analysis of the language on which a method is based, for example, by producing different types of grammar; and they may affect

the classroom techniques of language teaching, for example, by stressing either meaning or form.

Differences in language description directly affect what is taught by producing analyses of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary which may vary both in type and extent. Differences in the type of description influence what is taught by considering parts of the language as being the same or different; for example, a method based on one description may teach as the same, sentence structures which would constitute several separate teaching points in a method based on a different description. Differences in the extent of the description affect both the completeness and the accuracy of what is taught; for example, a method based on a description whose phonetics includes little on intonation is likely to be incomplete in its presentation of intonation patterns.

Differences in ideas on language learning affect both the method and the teaching of it. A method or teaching technique based on the idea that we learn a second language as a child learns his native language will differ from one based on the idea that we fail to learn a second language because of interference from our native language. The latter view also promotes a type of language description aimed at bringing out the differences between the first language and the second. Because they affect both description and method, ideas on language learning are best studied after language description and before method; for this reason they are treated in the first part, immediately before the section on method.

II METHOD

A method determines what and how much is taught (selection), the order in which it is taught (gradation), how the meaning and form are conveyed (presentation) and what is done to make the use of the language unconscious (repetition). Since both presentation and repetition may also be the concern of the teacher, the analysis must first determine how much is done by the method and how much by the teacher.

III TEACHING

The actual teaching of a language may differ in the analysis of what is to be taught, in the planning of the lessons, in the teaching techniques used, in the type and amount of teaching done through mechanical means, and finally, in the testing of what has been learned.

The analysis of language teaching must therefore be concerned with three distinct but related fields of analysis: I. Language Analysis, II. Method Analysis, III. Teaching Analysis.

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LANGUAGE ANALYSIS

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0. INTRODUCTION

What is the relevance of language theory to the analysis of language teaching? Language-teaching methods and the teaching of them depend ultimately on what the teacher or method maker thinks a language is. If a method is based on the assumption that a language is a collection of words—and there are many such methods—it will differ considerably from one based on the assumption that a language is a system; language considered as traditional grammar will be taught differently from language as current usage. The basis may be an unconscious assumption influenced by popular and traditional notions about language, or it may be a conscious assumption forming part of one or more theories of language. As language-teaching method becomes more and more scientific, however, it rests to a greater and greater extent on conscious and explicit theoretical assumptions about language. Whether conscious or unconscious, such theories decide the ultimate outcome of language-teaching methods and the descriptions on which they are based. Where can such theories be found?

Many fields of knowledge have been concerned with language and some have elaborated theories to explain its workings. Since different fields of knowledge are concerned with different things, or study the same thing in different ways, it is not surprising that there is a large number of different answers to the simple question: What is language? To the philosopher, language may be an instrument of thought; to the sociologist, a form of behaviour; to the psychologist, a cloudy window through which he glimpses the workings of the mind; to the logician, it may be a calculus; to the engineer, a series of physical events; to the statistician, a selection by choice and chance; to the linguist, a system of arbitrary signs.

Modern theories of language, unlike those of ancient and medieval times, are more concerned with how language works than with why it exists. They therefore tend to base their principles on the observation of language and languages. The theory will therefore depend on what is observed and how it is observed. In each field of knowledge concerned with language, there are different and often contrary ways of observing linguistic facts.

In the field of philosophy, some writers regard language as an external expression of universal thought; others would reduce all differences in philosophy to differences in the use of language. In the field of psychology, theories of language tend to differ according to both the school of psychology and the branch of psychology practised—social, educational, or child psychology. For some psychologists, language is a type of symbolism with many functions; for others, it is a man-made instrument of communication. Linguists, whose special field is the study of language, maintain an

Language Theory

even greater divergence of theories. To the linguist, language may be form and not matter; or it may be a system of arbitrary vocal symbols; or it may be a system of systems, a system of hierarchies, or even a hierarchy of systems. To some, it may be material; to others it may be mental. To some it may include only vocal symbols; to others, it may also include written symbols.

If there are differences within each field, there are also points of similarity between theories in different fields—the agreement, for example, of certain linguists, psychologists and philosophers on the non-material nature of language.

To locate these points of difference and similarity, it is necessary to compare the theories according to their main characteristics. What are the main characteristics of a theory? A theory assumes the validity of certain basic concepts, states the nature of that part of the field of knowledge which it selects as its legitimate concern, and treats it from a certain point of view through the use of certain terms. These four characteristics, therefore, are the main lines on which we can place theories in order to compare them: (1) the validity of concepts, (2) the nature of language, (3) aspects of language, and (4) terminology. These are the four ways in which one theory may differ from another. By examining each of them, we can get some idea of the differences between language theories and the possible influence of these theories on language-teaching methods.

1. THE VALIDITY OF CONCEPTS

What sort of understanding does a theory of language convey? To what branch of knowledge does the study of language belong? What are its central problems? How should knowledge about them be acquired—by experience or reasoning? Should a language theory be based on a distinction between the physical and the mental? These are some of the questions which all theories of language must face. They must also face the possibility of being identified with one or other of the conflicting schools of philosophy. Indeed it is in the contemporary theories of language that the great conflicts of method in twentieth-century philosophy are most clearly reflected.

Some of the best-known philosophers of the twentieth century have based their philosophy on an analysis of language. The work of Russell with the language of mathematics and his view of mathematical knowledge as merely verbal knowledge led eventually to the notion that much of philosophy could be reduced to problems of language.²⁶⁷ Wittgenstein devoted most of his philosophy to an analysis of everyday language and to a study of the function of words.²⁷⁹ Others, like Cassirer, began to con-

sider language as an independent mental form—scientific thinking as another, religious thinking as still another mental form.²³⁵ Being thus independent, language could not be understood through the concepts and methods of other sciences. Urban used the very existence of language as a proof that metaphysics and ethics could be meaningful;²¹⁹ while Carnap rejected these as meaningless since they were not open to logical analysis, which he based on the analysis—or rather, reconstruction—of syntax. For Carnap the only proper task of philosophy was logical analysis. Philosophy became logic; logic became syntax.²²⁵

The basing of philosophy on language analysis is one thing; the basing of language analysis on philosophy is quite another. The preoccupations of the philosopher are not those of the linguist. Each makes a different use of the tools of language and logic. Although both may make use of formal logic, as do Carnap in philosophy and Hjelmslev in linguistics, they use it for different purposes: Carnap uses it to build up a language; Hjelmslev, to break it down. The philosopher is interested in the direct or indirect proof of linguistic statements. Not so the linguist; indeed, many of the statements the linguist is likely to analyse will be logically irrelevant, since they have to do with feelings and images. The linguist is interested in the form and meaning of all possible statements in a language—questions, commands, value judgments—which form the bulk of everyday discourse and have to be analysed as meaningful.

Some linguists claim independence of any philosophical assumption by adopting the pragmatic attitude that only facts verified by the senses are valid and that theories can only be summaries of such facts.²⁶⁹ But this in itself is a philosophical assumption which shapes the theory.

It is such philosophical assumptions of linguistics, rather than the linguistic assumptions of philosophy, that are relevant to the conceptual foundations of language theory. And these may differ in two fundamental respects—(1) on the concept of man, and (2) on the concept of knowledge.

1.1 LANGUAGE AND THE CONCEPT OF MAN

Since language is a human activity, different ideas on what human activity involves produce different notions on what a language is. Human activity may be regarded (1) as wholly physical (the mechanist view), or (2) as largely mental (the mentalist view).

1.1.1. The Mechanist View

This view of man considers the mind as an extension of the body, different only in that the activity of the mind is more difficult to observe. The difference between the mental and the physical, between the animate and the