

# **Explorations in Applied Linguistics 2**

**H.G. Widdowson**

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**To my sons: Marc-Alain and Arnold**

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# Introduction

The papers in this book are further enquiries into issues raised in its predecessor of the same title, and in particular they seek to discharge the responsibility of applied linguistics, as stated in the earlier book (and restated in the first Section of this one), to devise a coherent model of linguistic description which will be relevant to language teaching.

As before, the papers here are in some respects a varied assortment. They were prepared at different times and so mark different stages in the conceptualization of the matters concerned. Some focus attention on descriptive issues, others attend more closely to pedagogic ones. Again, some papers were written within an academic framework and key their arguments in with the publications of other people, acknowledged by citation and reference in the approved scholarly fashion; other papers, more popular in intention and designed to be performed, dispense with these accoutrements of scholarship altogether.

But beneath the appearance of variety of presentation, there is a pattern of recurring ideas which are taken up from the previous book and bear upon the common applied linguistic purpose I have referred to. They are all concerned with the formulation of a relevant model of language which will serve as a source of reference for a principled approach to language teaching. And they all subscribe to the assumption that if language teaching is to develop the ability to use language as a resource for communication in the natural manner, then what is required is a model of language use rather than one based on linguistic analysis of the kind that has conventionally informed the practice of teaching.

The formulation of such a model has to be expressed in terms which allow it to be assessed as description, but it also has to be shown to be relevant to pedagogy. Hence the varying emphasis on descriptive and pedagogic issues in these papers. The variation in mode of presentation is a function of their applied linguistic purpose. There would be little point in proposing a model of

description as relevant to teaching if the description and the discussion of its relevance were not made accessible to teachers. At the same time, of course, the model on offer has to make some claim to validity as description. There are obvious risks in thus attempting to reconcile the requirements of both validity and relevance. Often, of course, one finds oneself in no-man's land, a target for snipers in entrenched positions on both sides, one espousing the cause of practicality, the other the cause of theoretical rigour. But these risks are the occupational hazards of applied linguists and I do not see how they can be avoided.

As in the previous book the papers here have been sorted into sections. Some of them (as for example in Sections Five and Six) are concerned primarily with the working out of pedagogic implications and some (as in Section Three) with more technical matters of description. In other cases (as for example in Sections Two and Four) descriptive and pedagogic issues are given equal prominence. But in all sections and in all papers the dual perspective is presupposed.

Although all sections are meant to bear upon the general theme, each is also supposed to have its own independent coherence and to be comprehensible without reference to the others. Within each section, the papers are placed in approximate chronological order of first appearance, so it is possible to trace the development of a particular line of enquiry. This means that the sections do not follow on from each other in linear fashion but run, as it were, in parallel, so that the last paper in a particular section will often reflect the same stage of thinking as the last one in a different section (one might compare, for example, Papers 9, 15, and 18). The only exception to this chronological principle of ordering is in Section Four where it seemed to me to be preferable to show the development of descriptive ideas first before bringing in the question of teaching.

The way the papers have been arranged will, I hope, not only help to bring different areas of enquiry into focus but will also reveal the process of enquiry itself. For these papers, like those in the previous book, are intended to be illustrations of the *kind* of investigation that I believe is necessary if the different techniques of language teaching are to be given rational endorsement in principle, as they must be if methodology is to have any real meaning. Both modesty and scepticism prevent me from believing that anything in this book, or its predecessor, has any real permanence. Its value lies in the possibility that others might be provoked into pursuing

explorations of a similar kind, but with greater skill and to better effect.

All the papers in this collection were written since I joined the Department of English for Speakers of Other Languages at the University of London Institute of Education six years ago, and owe a good deal to the support and stimulating influence of my colleagues and students there. They, together with all those people at conferences and seminars in various parts of the world who encouraged me with their approval must bear some responsibility for this book.

H. G. Widdowson  
May 1983



## SECTION ONE

# Theory and practice

The papers in this first section provide the conceptual setting for those which follow. They are all concerned with the principles which relate theory to practice and which, in my view, define applied linguistics as an area of enquiry bearing on the techniques of language teaching.

Paper 1 is a variation of a paper published in the first volume of *Explorations in Applied Linguistics* under the title 'The partiality and relevance of linguistic descriptions'. Indeed, certain passages from the earlier paper are repeated here, placed now in a different pattern of argument but contributing to the same conclusion: that in applied linguistics our task is to look for models of language description which relate to the experience of the learner as user. This paper, then, indicates quite explicitly a continuity of thinking from the previous book, and sets the scene for this present one.

Paper 2 takes up the same theme but associates it with more general epistemological issues. It seeks to show the culturally relative nature of all systematic enquiry and the implications of this for the status of statements which claim to give a scientific account of human behaviour. This paper bears on the whole question of whether we can, or should, expect any such statements to provide *explanations* rather than partial representations of reality which can facilitate our *understanding* (cf. Ochsner 1979).

Both of these papers talk about the difference between analyst-oriented models of language system and participant-oriented models of language use, claiming primary relevance for the latter with regard to the practices of language teaching and learning. Both are somewhat circumspect about theory. The third paper in this section, on the other hand, proclaims its importance.

There is no contradiction here. Papers 1 and 2 argue against too ready a reliance on theory which has not been assessed for relevance; Paper 3 argues for the need to adopt a theoretical orientation to the teaching task itself, whereby techniques are tested

in the operational conditions of the classroom as implementations of principles explicitly formulated in advance. All the papers in this section, then, subscribe to the basic belief that effective practice depends on theory, but that the theory has to be relevant to the purposes of practice and has to yield principles which can be interpreted and tested as practical teaching techniques.

# 1 Applied linguistics: the pursuit of relevance

The term *applied linguistics* suggests that its concern is with the use of findings from theoretical studies of language for the solution of problems of one sort or another arising in a different domain. The close association of applied linguistics with language teaching (to the extent, in some quarters, of virtual synonymy) is based on the belief that such findings must necessarily be relevant to the practical teaching of languages. It would seem to be self-evident that since linguists study language and teachers teach it, there must be a relevant connection if only one could find it. It seems perverse to question such a belief. Nevertheless, that is what I propose to do. The relevance of linguistics cannot, I think, be taken for granted because it is not obvious that the way linguists conceive of language is the most appropriate for teaching purposes. I want to suggest that the main business of applied linguistics should be the establishing of appropriate concepts or models of language in the pedagogic domain without prejudging the issue by supposing that a relevant model of language must inevitably derive from a formal model of linguistic description in a technical sense.

The following is a representative statement of the belief that I wish to question:

This is the main contribution that the linguistic sciences can make to the teaching of languages: to provide good descriptions. ... The best suited linguistics is the body of accurate descriptive methods based on recent research into the form and substance of language. There is no conflict between application and theory; the methods most useful in application are to be found among those that are most valid and powerful in theory. (Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens 1964: 167)

In case it is objected that I am quoting from an out-of-date book, here is a more recent expression of the same view:

The relevance of the linguistic approach to language teaching is that it provides by far the most detailed and comprehensive descriptions of language. ... The linguistic approach is responsible for determining how we *describe* what we are to teach. (Corder 1973: 30-31)

It is interesting to compare these declarations of faith with the more cautious comments of Chomsky:

It is possible—even likely—that principles of psychology and linguistics, and research in these disciplines, may supply insights useful to the language teacher. But this must be demonstrated, and cannot be presumed. It is the language teacher himself who must validate or refute any specific proposal. There is very little in psychology or linguistics that he can accept on faith. (Quoted from Allen and Van Buren 1971: 155)

I think it is the responsibility of applied linguistics to demonstrate whether or not linguistics can provide insights of use to the language teacher and to investigate other sources of insight in the search for relevant models. This paper attempts a preliminary exploration of the issues. I shall argue that it is possible—even likely—that linguistics, as customarily conceived, may *not* be the most suitable source for a practical teaching model of language.

We can begin with an example given in Halliday *et al.* (1964) of what we must assume to be a 'good description' derived from 'accurate descriptive methods'. It is the formal distributional definition of the noun as a word class which is contrasted with the bad, old-fashioned conceptual definition. This, of course, is a standard demonstration of the merits of structural linguistics. Halliday *et al.* make the usual point that notional or conceptual definitions of a noun, as the name of a person, place, thing, etc., are vague and misleading:

Conceptually defined categories can be held precisely because they are incapable of exact applications; some of the definitions have survived to this day, protected by a cosy unreality. But it is doubtful if any English schoolboy, having to find out whether a certain word is a noun or not, asks: 'Is this the name of a person, place, or thing?' More probably he will test whether it has a plural in -s, or whether he can put the definite article in front of it. Since he is probably required to decide that 'departure' is a noun whereas 'somebody' is not, he is more likely to reach the right conclusion by this method. (Halliday *et al.* 1964: 145)



What needs to be noted here is that application is conceived of as an analytic procedure. The formal definition is preferred because it is more helpful when it comes to *finding* nouns. Although this might be an activity required of schoolboys, it is not an activity normally required of language users. Indeed, when a language user begins to identify nouns, one can be fairly sure that he is no longer attending to what is being said. It is only when we assume the role of analyst (as the schoolboy may well be directed to do) that we set about finding and testing word classes, and we only assume such a role when our normal procedures for *using* such classes for communicative purposes break down. Now one may readily concede that the old-fashioned notional definitions do not yield very satisfactory syntactic categories for the analyst, but it does not follow that they do not capture a certain conceptual reality for the user. The question then arises as to whether a relevant model for teaching language is to derive from that of the analyst or from that of the user. If they are incongruent, and if there are grounds for preferring the user's model, then there *is* a conflict between what is useful in application and what is valid in theory.

But are the two models incongruent? I believe that in certain important respects they are, in that they are related to two quite different ways of conceiving of language. The analyst represents language in terms of an abstract system by devising a model which must conform to principles of scientific enquiry. There can be no tolerance for vague notions, imprecision, and ambiguity. The emphasis must be on 'accurate descriptive methods'. Now it may be that such a model can be seen as representing in some sense the underlying knowledge that users have of their language, but it is knowledge that they are generally unaware of since they are never called upon, in normal circumstances, to manifest it but only to realize it as communicative behaviour. And communicative behaviour is vague, imprecise, and ambiguous. This is because it draws on resources for meaning in the language which cannot always be reduced to linguistic rules since they just have not been encoded as such in the language system, and because language behaviour *has* to be imprecise if it is to function effectively as communicative interaction. I shall return to these points presently.

What I am suggesting is that the very exactitude required of the analyst's model makes it essentially inadequate as an explanation of user behaviour. It also makes empirical validation very tricky, perhaps ultimately impossible. It is not a matter of performance being an imperfect reflection of competence, of the analyst's model