

THE LANGUAGE TEACHING CONTROVERSY



KARL CONRAD DILLER

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About the early edition of this book—*Generative Grammar, Structural Linguistics, and Language Teaching* (1971)—

Professor Diller has succinctly amassed the major theories and opinions dealing with language and language acquisition which have been so very influential in shaping our ideas and practices concerning *how* foreign languages ought to be and are being taught. . . . Diller's penetrating and revealing analyses pose several compelling questions for anyone truly concerned with the future of foreign language teaching.

—James R. Shawl, *The German Quarterly*

Anyone whose responsibility in foreign or second language teaching extends beyond passive obedience to one's superiors into active design and development of methods and materials for such teaching would do well to digest the contents of this modest but pellucid discussion . . .

—E. James Murphy, *American Anthropologist*

This is, for all its scholarly appearance, a chatty little book which may be read comfortably in one's armchair.

—*Malaysian Journal of Education*

About the author—

Karl Diller has an EdM (Applied Linguistics) and a PhD (Linguistics) from Harvard University. He has taught English as a Second Language in a bilingual college near Montreal, has been a visiting professor at the University of Hawaii, and for four years was in charge of the English program for foreign students at Harvard University. He currently teaches linguistics and applied linguistics at the University of New Hampshire.

TO ANN

PREFACE to this Edition

This book is part of a very lively controversy in linguistics and language teaching, a controversy whose roots can be traced to the beginnings of modern thought in arguments between empiricists and rationalists. From about 1933 to 1957 most American linguists, who carefully called themselves "structural" or "descriptive" linguists, espoused an empiricist or even behaviorist theory of language acquisition. Since 1957 the empiricist position has been seriously challenged by Noam Chomsky and generative transformational grammar; and many linguists (myself included) moved toward some version of the rationalist theory of language acquisition. Although it has taken a new turn, the controversy between empiricists and rationalists has by no means ended. Bever and Katz are even worried that empiricism may be regaining lost ground, as they argue in their article "The Fall and Rise of Empiricism" (1976).

The first edition of this book came out in 1971 with a title which, to some, seemed to be too scholarly and to mask the excitement of the arguments it presented. It was called *Generative Grammar, Structural Linguistics and Language Teaching*. In spite of the title, students and language teachers have found it a very practical book, and have often used it for classroom discussion and study. One reader even suggested to the publisher that the title should be changed to *A Language Teacher's Handbook*. In fact the controversy over

methods and the implications of the theories for language teaching received at least as much attention as did the controversy over theories. Three new chapters in this revised edition will be of special interest to practicing language teachers: a chapter on new trends for teaching languages to adults, one on how long it takes to produce a bilingual, and an epilog on making judgments about methods. Another chapter treating the problems of doing research on foreign language teaching should be of interest to teachers and experimenters alike.

Nearly everyone, it seems, has an opinion about the optimum age for learning a second language. This is the topic of chapter 10. It is actually an important issue for a rationalist theory of language acquisition, as is the question of language aptitude, which I discuss in chapter 11.

To facilitate classroom use, I have added, for each chapter, questions for discussion, review, and further study. Except for this, the first eight chapters remain substantially unchanged.

In sequence, then, we start by tracing the history of a controversy; we turn next to the implications which these competing theories have for language teaching methods and for practical questions of teaching and research. We conclude by urging the reader to exercise judgment before taking the next steps into the future—given, now, some assurance of where we have been in language teaching, and one view of where we ought to be going.

Karl Conrad Diller

Northwood, New Hampshire
1977

PREFACE to the first Edition

The idea for this book dates back to 1963-64 when I was studying under that professional skeptic and critic John B. Carroll at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Every Tuesday and Thursday during the fall term we examined research reports of people who tried to quantify and measure various language phenomena—and we found that every single report had some flaw, either technical or conceptual, which vitiated its results to some degree. It was a devastating way to begin graduate study. At the same time, I took half my courses in linguistic theory at M.I.T. under Morris Halle and Noam Chomsky—an equally revolutionary experience from a positive point of view. These three men have had the most influence in the development of my thought.

I spent the next three years earning my Ph.D. in the Harvard Department of Linguistics, and I wish to thank Karl Teeter and Calvert Watkins, chairmen of the department, for their help in broadening the scope of my study.

My Ph.D. thesis (1967) was the first draft of the material presented here. The writing of the thesis was done with the supervision of Wayne O'Neil, Einar Haugen, and Dwight Bolinger. All three are strong in their own opinions, and at

least two of them were not to be easily convinced by my position. The long discussions which ensued were without question the high point of my doctoral program.

The present book is almost entirely rewritten. J. K. Galbraith recommends locking a new manuscript into a bank vault for a couple of years before revising it for publication. He was forced to do that with *The New Industrial State* when he went off to be ambassador to India. My reasons for delay are not so glorious, but I, too, recommend the practice.

The reader will soon be aware of my bias. I am critical of the theories and teaching methods which have been held by the linguistic establishment for the last several decades—the empiricist-behaviorist theory of language learning and the “audio-lingual” method of mimicry, memorization, and pattern drill. I favor the rationalist theory of language learning as put forth by Noam Chomsky, and the tightly organized direct methods of language teaching which have been based on older versions of the same theory. Sol Saporta (1966) saw that generative grammar has undermined the behavioristic theories and methods of language teaching which linguists have been recommending, but he and others in the profession have not seen what the positive contributions of generative grammar might be. This book can be seen as a statement of the implications which generative grammar should have for language teaching.

Karl Conrad Diller

Cambridge, Massachusetts
1971

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

THE DUAL HISTORY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

The history of foreign language teaching often appears to have been a history of failure. Not many students of foreign languages ever attain full bilingual proficiency. In fact, very few language majors in American colleges get even halfway there—to the level of “minimum professional proficiency.” In 1965, 90 per cent of the graduating French majors failed to reach the level of minimum professional proficiency in speaking, and only half of them reached that level in reading (Carroll 1967, 14, 89). The so-called “reading knowledge” of a language required for a Ph.D. degree is an even lower level of proficiency, equivalent to just passing a second-year college language course (Harvey 1968). Very few American scholars can do serious research in languages other than English. Even linguists have all too tellingly proclaimed that they are not polyglots. Roman Jakobson likes to tell how Professor Antoine Meillet of Paris and Professor Edgar Sturtevant of Yale, two of the world’s great Indo-European linguists of the last generation, had to talk to each other through an interpreter when they met.

But in spite of the widespread failure at language learning, we all know of people who had spectacular success at becoming bilingual. One’s own grandfather, perhaps, was

born in Europe—in a bilingual area of Switzerland, say, where he went to school five days a week in French and the sixth day in German. At age fourteen this grandfather might have come to America to spend a year in a one-room schoolhouse getting an eighth grade education in English. The result was a person who had soon mastered English and who had native speaker proficiency (at the eighth grade level) in three languages.

The discrepancy between the successes and the failures in foreign language learning is so embarrassing to teachers that it has made language acquisition the most emotion-ridden and controversial aspect of linguistic theory. And the “new” methods for language teaching which are continually being invented are advertised as if they were patent medicines for some heretofore incurable ailment.

The major language acquisition controversy has been that of the “empiricists” vs. the “rationalists,” to use Chomsky’s terms (Chomsky 1965, 47-48). Both of these theoretical traditions have long histories and several different methods of language teaching which try to carry out their theoretical presuppositions about what language is and how it is learned.

If we ignore this long-standing theoretical division between rationalists and empiricists, the history of foreign language teaching is terribly confusing and doesn’t make sense. Books on language teaching usually have a chapter on history which names off a selection of different teaching methods that have followed one another down through the centuries. There was the Ollendorf method, the Jacotot method, the natural method, the imitative method, the series method, the direct method, the reading method, the Army method, the grammar method, the translation method, the inductive method, the linguistic method, the oral method, the aural-oral method, the audio-lingual method, maybe a dozen or so other methods, and now, finally the author’s “new” method.

These histories are not very satisfactory, because they usually fail to show any relationship between the various methods. All methods seem to have emerged full-blown from their creators’ heads, with no debt to previous teachers and no effect on later ones. These histories seem to imply that there were no theoretical justifications for the older methods,

and that the old-fashioned methods were all created unthinkingly for *ad hoc* situations. The net effect is not of history at all, but of a catalog of unrelated and apparently unsuccessful teaching methods.

Descriptive linguists have sometimes tried to impose order on the chaos of methods. They have even brought in some theoretical considerations—but only to assert that until American descriptive linguists got into the act in World War II, there were no scientifically based language teaching methods. Robert Lado, for example, in his *Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach* (1964), says that first there was the classical grammar-translation method. But this hardly qualifies as language teaching, since people weren't taught to speak. Then everyone who taught a spoken language before World War II is said to have used the "direct method." He mentions Viëtor, Jespersen, and Palmer as proponents of this direct method. Then, he says, "the advocates of the direct method, failing to achieve decisive results for a variety of reasons, drifted in the 1930's into a more limited goal of a reading knowledge. This was a purely passive understanding of graded readings with dictionary help on difficult words" (Lado 1964, 5). Finally, then, linguists came along with a scientific approach, and created methods of mimicry, memorization, and pattern drill for the Army Specialized Training Program in World War II.

Lado has a nice simple schema for the history of language teaching. The only trouble is that it is simply wrong. First of all, Jespersen and Palmer were not proponents of the "direct method." Jespersen explicitly dissociated himself from Gouin and Berlitz (both of whom did propose direct methods), and he rejected the term "direct method" as quite inappropriate for what he called his "imitative method" of language teaching (Jespersen 1904, 2). Palmer stated that "the exclusion of the mother tongue is generally, if not always, a vicious procedure productive of the most harmful results" (Palmer 1917, 251). That statement alone is enough to disqualify Palmer's method as a "direct method." In reality, Jespersen and Palmer and a whole host of late nineteenth-century linguists (Jespersen lists Sweet, Storm, Sievers, Sayce, and Lundell) were direct precursors to the

mimicry, memorization, and pattern drill of twentieth-century American linguists. As Einar Haugen has pointed out, every one of Leonard Bloomfield's ideas on language teaching "builds on the references he gives to European writers, and particularly Otto Jespersen" (Haugen 1955, 244). Mimicry and memorization play a central role in Jespersen's methodology, and he calls for a version of pattern drill as well. Palmer also was in favor of mimicry and memorization, and in 1916 he came out with the first published book of pattern drills for English as a foreign language. In short, ever since the 1880's linguists have had their methods of mimicry, memorization, and pattern drill, and ever since that time there has been a controversy between these linguists and others (like Gouin, Berlitz, and de Sauzé) who argued for direct methods.

There is also no basis for Lado's assertion that proponents of the direct method failed to achieve decisive results and went over to the reading method. It is true that Algernon Coleman recommended the reading method in a report issued under the auspices of the Modern Foreign Language Study (Coleman 1929). But no advocate of the direct method accepted Coleman's report. A dissenting statement was issued by three members of the committee of direction and control of the Modern Foreign Language Study, and Coleman took upon himself sole responsibility for his report, absolving other participants in the study from its recommendations. An open letter attacking the Coleman report was signed by eighty-six leading advocates of the direct method, and was published in the *Modern Language Journal* (Mercier et al. 1931).¹ The direct method did not die out at all, but is alive and flourishing—particularly in the Berlitz schools (where it has been going strong for a century, now), and in the Cleveland public schools where they have been using Emile B. de Sauzé's Cleveland Plan for more than 50 years. Recently a number of new textbooks have appeared which are outgrowths of de Sauzé's experience.²

¹ On the politics of the Modern Foreign Language Study, see also Barall 1949, Morgan 1930, Meras 1931, and Mercier 1931.

² Lénard 1965, 1969, Pucciani and Hamel 1967, Traversa 1967, Pfister 1968.

Why did Lado and the other descriptive linguists overlook the fact that ever since the 1880's there has been a controversy between proponents of the direct methods and the linguists who favored mimicry, memorization, and pattern drills? There are at least two reasons. First, they were so sure about the correctness of their scientific linguistics that they could not even conceive that other theories of grammar had enough validity to cause legitimate controversy. They had a *new* approach to language which they thought superseded all other theories of grammar without serious argument. Second, the emphasis on new scientific developments blinded them to the fact that Leonard Bloomfield had European predecessors. Thus Mary R. Haas could write in 1943 that "Principles first used in recording American Indian languages have been applied to the teaching of Oriental languages with unexpectedly good results" (Haas 1943, 203), completely ignoring the fact, as Haugen pointed out (1955), that these principles had been used by European linguists to describe non-Indian languages and that indeed the principles had already been applied to the teaching of European languages. But newness has always been highly valued by the descriptive linguists, and in 1960 Charles C. Fries was still maintaining that his was "A New Approach to Language Learning"; in 1965 Belasco and Valdman brought out their *College French in the New Key*; and in 1966 Robert A. Hall, Jr. published a book on *New Ways to Learn a Foreign Language*—all advocating a method that was already highly developed in 1916.

It should seem obvious that the history of foreign language teaching did not have a linear development. We do not have a situation in which the faults of one method were corrected by a new method, each one superseding the last. Rather, we have two separate histories. The great theoretical division between linguists—the empiricists vs. the rationalists—also divides the language teaching methodologies. Teachers on the one side include Jespersen, Palmer, and the other European linguists of the "reform method," along with Leonard Bloomfield and his following of American descriptive linguists—all having an "empiricist" or "behaviorist" theory of language acquisition. On the other side we have Francois