Second-language learning and teaching

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SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

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Edward Arnold

First published 1974
by Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd
25 Hill Street, London W1X 8LL

ISBN: 0 7131 5758 5 Boards Edition
0 7131 5759 3 Paper Edition

Printed in Great Britain by
Billing & Sons Ltd
Guildford and London

Acknowledgements

Although this book expresses a personal view of language teaching, I have been able to benefit from suggestions made by a number of colleagues in the University of Reading and elsewhere. Former students have also contributed much through the opinions they have expressed in our discussions of the issues raised here. Those examples which are not my own have been drawn from R. H. Robins, *General linguistics: an introductory survey* (Longman, 1971) and J. Lyons, *Introduction to theoretical linguistics* (Cambridge University Press, 1968). I have borrowed the example on page 19 from Svante Hjelmström.

Note on further reading

If the reader should be interested in exploring further any of the areas discussed in this book, the following titles are recommended.

On language:

D. Bolinger, *Aspects of language* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968)

On language acquisition:

P. S. Dale, *Language development* (New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972)

On language teaching:

W. M. Rivers, *Teaching foreign language skills* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1968)

Prologue

It is my belief that there is no single, 'best' way of teaching foreign languages. We can neither select one of the number of well-publicized methods that is proposed to us, nor, by taking account of the undoubted weaknesses of each of them, can we arrive at a more satisfactory alternative. Language learning does not have to proceed by the same path whatever the objectives and circumstances of learning. The readiness of some methodologists to condemn certain kinds of language teaching and to promote others, and their desire to impose unique solutions regardless of the aims of learning and the conditions under which it is to take place, is in my view the result of far too narrow a conception of the principles that govern language learning. Language teaching is a pragmatic business and we should judge it accordingly. What works is good; what does not work is bad. Unfortunately, it is not at all easy to decide what does and what does not work, but at least we should be on our guard against importing a ready-made set of principles against which any piece of language teaching can be judged whatever the teaching situation. We know that in some cases, with certain pupils and with certain teachers, methods that we commonly castigate can be successful and conversely that methods that find general favour can fail. The reason is that the principles that govern language learning are sufficiently general to permit the same goals to be reached by methods and techniques that vary considerably in their details and to necessitate different approaches for different goals.

The aim of this book is to try to establish what these general principles are by looking first at the nature of the subject-matter, language, then at what is known about the learning of languages and finally at the way in which external factors can affect learning.

From this I attempt to deduce what the necessary and sufficient conditions for language learning are and to suggest what the fundamental characteristics of successful language teaching are. As I have said, I believe the principles of sound language teaching to be very general. I am therefore not concerned with and do not discuss specific teaching techniques. Different techniques can be used within the principles that I put forward, and although the contribution that any technique makes to language learning has to be assessed in the light of what is known about language in general, the specific language being taught and the facts of learning, no technique is actually excluded as a matter of principle.

By *language teaching* I mean both second- and foreign-language teaching and except where I have limited these two terms to their more technical use (and such instances are, I hope, self-evident), I intend them to be understood as synonymous. In the absence of a term which covers both kinds of learning, I have used *second-language learning* in the title, but intend it to include *foreign-language learning*.

I address myself to all who have an interest in language teaching, but one eye is firmly on language teachers in training. I assume no previous knowledge of linguistics or psychology but the book will be read with greatest understanding by those with a knowledge of recent developments in language teaching. The principles that I propose are general, but, I hope, not vague. They certainly have very practical implications and I hope that these are clear.

Contents

1 *The nature of language*

1.1 The versatility of language

Language is a means of communication. Although not the only form of communication among human beings, it is certainly the most important. We can communicate in ways that do not involve language, as when advertisers provide powerful visual associations for their products or when we use bodily movements, frowns, shrugs, headshakings and so on. Some apparently non-linguistic means of communication are no more than symbol systems for language itself, for example morse-code, shorthand and sign language. The symbols of these systems refer to units of language, and it is these latter which are given a semantic interpretation. Human language differs from animal 'language' not only in the unique way in which it exploits sound, the substance of expression, but also in the enormous subtlety of variation in content that its formal structure permits. Our entire elaborate social structure is mediated through language, and it is inconceivable that we could have constructed so complex a social interaction if we had not had spoken and, latterly, written language at our disposal. Language is central to human experience and if we are to understand the process by which men communicate with one another, we must look closely at the human capacity for language and at the particular qualities of language which enable it to play so powerful a role within us and between us.

We might well begin by considering just how successfully we do communicate through language. We find in fact that we have a remarkable versatility. We never know what we are going to need

to communicate and yet when the time comes, as mature speakers of the language, provided the necessary knowledge and experience itself is not lacking, we have no difficulty in expressing whatever it may be we have the need to express. Whether we are involved in day-to-day interaction with members of our family, in complex explanations of unforeseen events, in emotional reactions to unexpected happenings, in the familiar or the unfamiliar alike, we can quite unconsciously apply our knowledge of language to meeting the demands of what we need to say or write. Nor is this in some way a feat of memory. We do not know how to express ourselves because we have often had to do so in the same or similar ways in the past. It is very rare that what we wish to express now is exactly the same as something we have wanted to say previously. There is usually some difference of emphasis, of conviction or of situation at the very least. In other words, the demands that we want to place on language are virtually limitless.

It is perhaps the most important characteristic of language that it is formed in a way that enables it to meet these demands. Just as life itself places us in situations that are never twice quite the same, so language allows us continually to express novel propositions. Our faculty of language is a faculty of linguistic creativity. Most of the sentences we utter have never been constructed by us previously and many, indeed, have never been constructed by anyone else either. There is literally no limit to the number of sentences that we can create in English, for example. This is not, as one might first suppose, because the vocabulary of the language is very large and is constantly being added to. Even if at any one moment there were a limit to the number of words in the language, there would still be no limit to the number of sentences.

The explanation of this significant fact may seem rather technical and possibly, in a sense, unrealistic. It lies in the fact that sentences may always contain other sentences. No more need really be said, but to make it quite explicit, this means that the sentence which is already within (or conjoined to) another sentence may itself contain a sentence. This embedded sentence need not appear as a full sentence. It may be reduced to an adjective, a phrase or a relative clause, for example. But in principle it is never possible to say:

'There are already so many adjectives before that noun that it is impossible to add one more.' I said that this explanation may seem rather unrealistic. There are good reasons why we might, in the real world, wish to limit the length of any utterance. Our hearers might be less tolerant of this infinite capability than the grammar of the language would be. However, it remains the case that the grammar alone would not place any such restriction on our utterances. We could prolong the uttering of a sentence that remained grammatical long after the audience had removed itself from our presence.

Fortunately, although the number of potential sentences in any language is infinite, the means by which they are constructed are limited. Once it is accepted that sentences can be embedded within sentences and that there is no restriction to the number of times that this may be done, it is possible to understand how an infinite product may be derived from finite means. Although, therefore, in our everyday use of language we continually need to express new statements and, consequently, must have the linguistic ability to do this, the rules we use are not infinite in number.

The ultimate aim in learning a second language must generally be to achieve the same flexibility, the same linguistic creativity that the native speaker possesses. This is not to say that we can expect the same degree of language proficiency, but that the criterion of our success as teachers is not whether our pupils can remember so many sentences, so many phrases, so many words that they have been taught, but whether they can construct new utterances in the language. There are occasions when a lower objective than this might be set, but, in that case, it is not truly language that is being learned.

It follows that the principal task in the learning of a second language is the mastering of the finite system by which linguistic creativity is achieved. A descriptive Grammar of the language conventionally attempts to set out for us the limited rules governing the construction of sentences. The more intensive study of language of recent decades has led us to regard most older Grammars as unduly narrow in scope, but, although there is now more to be said about language, the type of information that Grammars have always provided will continue to occupy a central position in any more comprehensive account of language. Grammars may also have

been too limited in outlook, in that grammarians have sometimes judged it to be their role to act as arbiters of what should be acceptable usage. Few grammarians now would attempt to use their authority to resist linguistic innovations or to label the normal speech of some social groups as 'incorrect' or 'ungrammatical'. It is the descriptive as opposed to the prescriptive function of a Grammar that contributes to our understanding of language.

How is a language organized to meet the demands that the individual's desire to communicate will place upon it? As well as possessing a set of grammatical rules through which linguistic creativity is achieved, language contains a system of symbols by means of which we can refer to entities in the physical world and can express more abstract concepts. These symbols constitute the vocabulary or lexicon of the language and they are listed in a dictionary. The way in which the grammatical system is applied in the actual process of communication depends on features of the individuals involved, the setting in which the communication takes place and the purposes of the users. These factors can consistently influence the speaker's choice of linguistic forms. Finally, there are rules governing the way in which language is expressed physically, either as sound or as visible shapes on paper. Except for intonation the phonic and graphic substance of language contributes only indirectly to meaning. The native speaker's linguistic competence is made up of a knowledge of all these aspects of language; but in considering in more detail the task that faces the language learner, let us look first at the role and nature of grammatical systems.

1.2 Grammatical meaning and grammatical form

When we use language, among other things, we express our ideas about the world that surrounds us. We talk about the things we see happening; who or what is responsible for the events that take place; who or what is affected by them. We refer to the objects of the physical world and to their qualities. We can report the activities that are carried out and the manner in which they are done. We can express the way in which events are related in time to one another and to the moment of speech. Events occur in a

spatial as well as a temporal dimension, so we need to be able to describe locations, directions and movements. At the same time as we are constructing a message to convey these and other kinds of meaning, we express our attitudes about the truth and reliability of the report we are making, whether it is certain or uncertain, desired or doubted.

Languages possess grammatical systems not, as some learners might be inclined to think, simply to make the learning of the language more difficult, but to express the kinds of meanings that we have just mentioned, which are themselves the whole purpose of communication. The grammatical devices of a language are not to be learned as an end in themselves. It is the capacity to express meaning that is the end. The grammatical system provides the necessary means.

The terms in which these meanings have been described have been deliberately vague. This is because, although it may be true to say that grammatical systems express the same *kinds* of meaning, in *detail* grammatical meaning varies considerably from language to language in just the same way as the grammatical devices themselves may differ quite radically. Grammatical form and grammatical meaning are the two sides of the same coin. Detailed examination of grammatical meaning is impossible without reference to the forms that carry the meaning, and the formal systems cannot be looked at in isolation from the meanings they convey. In the following discussion of the kinds of grammatical units and categories that languages commonly possess, the fact that formal systems are taken as the starting-point should not be taken to imply that grammatical form has priority over grammatical meaning. In learning, mastery of the forms would be valueless without equal mastery of the meanings they convey.

Making a description of the system that exists in a language to express grammatical meaning is essentially a matter of stating what happens to words when they are placed together in sentences. It is common for such statements to be divided into two parts: statements about the *morphology* or the internal structure of words in the language, and statements about the *syntax* or the relations between words in the sentence. However, the distinction between

the two is by no means a clear one. They may have very similar functions, in that the grammatical meaning that is conveyed by morphological devices in one language may be marked syntactically in another. The Finnish case system expresses meanings that in English require a prepositional phrase. For example, the Elative form of the noun *talo*, 'house', is *talosta*, which would be rendered as 'out of the house' in English. There is frequently also interaction between morphology and syntax. The exact morphological form of a past tense verb in a Russian sentence depends on the gender and number of the noun (Subject) with which it is syntactically associated. We tend to assume that the major burden of learning a foreign language is in mastering the inflectional characteristics of the language, but, in fact, the problems posed by rules of syntax are not necessarily any smaller.

In order to give a satisfactory account of the structure of a language, it is necessary to recognize that it can be split into units of different sizes. We have already made this assumption in talking about *words* and *sentences*. The existence of these units is not self-evident in the stream of speech. They are not handily marked off by pauses as they are separated by spaces in written language. None the less, we could not make an adequate description of a language without them. The word is the smallest unit capable of relatively independent occurrence and the sentence the largest unit for which we can offer a more or less exhaustive analysis. Words themselves may be made up of smaller units which will recur in different combinations. *Rapidly* is made up of *rapid*, which occurs independently as an adjective, and *-ly*, which is also found in *happily*. *Walked* is made up of *walk*, which occurs in *walking* and *-ed* which recurs in *talked*. Languages like Turkish are said to be *agglutinative* because of the characteristic way in which suffixes can be progressively added to a stem. The word *odalarımdan* is made up of *oda* (room), *-lar* (plural), *-ım* (first person), *-dan* (ablative case). Words also combine to form larger units within the sentence, traditionally labelled *phrases* and *clauses*. Grammatical relations between different sentences also exist, although it is not possible to identify a unit such as a *paragraph* because it would not be possible to state its structure in exhaustive terms.

We can account for the behaviour of words in sentences by recognizing that they belong to *classes*, the members of which have similar formal and, less certainly, semantic characteristics. *Nouns* are words which perform similar functions in sentences, for example, acting as Subjects of verbs. *Adjectives* are words which occur as modifiers of nouns and as predicates. Other classes of words that might be established in this way are *verbs*, *prepositions* and *adverbs*. These obviously resemble the traditional *parts of speech*, but the resemblance can be deceptive. The traditional class of adverbs in English, for example, contains items such as *very*, *never* and *slowly*, which have little in common grammatically. An adequate linguistic description would distinguish between them. Speakers of European languages tend to make assumptions about the universality of these classes, but that is because they themselves speak languages that are closely related to one another. If one looks further afield, one finds different numbers and types of word-classes and differing lexical memberships of those classes. The greater the difference between the unit and class structure of the learner's mother-tongue and the second language, the greater the difficulty he is likely to have in acquiring the latter. We should not let the similarity of many European languages in these respects deceive us into thinking that they are relatively unimportant in language learning.

Central to the grammar of any language are the grammatical categories that it exploits. There is a very wide variety of grammatical devices which are familiar to us in one or another of the world's languages. One language will contain only certain of the grammatical categories, and even where the same category is found in two languages it can be realized in radically different ways. Therein lies the problem for the language learner. *Case* is an inflectional category of nouns, adjectives and pronouns. There are languages like French, which has no case system in nouns and adjectives, others like Russian, which has six cases in the noun and adjective and others like Finnish, which has fifteen cases in the noun. Case expresses the relations between nouns and other items in the sentence, particularly verbs and other nouns. These are the relations which tell us such things as *who* (or *what*) did *what* to *whom*, with *what result* and by *what means*. The labels given to cases sometimes give a fairly trans-

parent indication of their syntactic meaning. For an English speaker this would be true for *instrumental* case, for example, whereas the meaning of labels like *nominative* and *genitive* is only apparent to someone who is familiar with a supposedly universal grammatical terminology. Given that each case is likely to represent a distinct syntactic function and that there is so much variation in the number of cases found in different languages, there is obviously much more for the learner in mastering case than simply overcoming the difficulties posed by its morphological forms. Even where languages have an identical number of cases, they will not necessarily express the same syntactic relations.

Number and *gender* are categories which often interact significantly with case. Number is an important semantic category as well as being a formal grammatical category, and where a language possesses the grammatical category of number, its semantic significance is usually self-evident. There are languages which do not mark number at all as an inflectional characteristic of nouns, adjectives or verbs, although this is not to say that they do not possess the means of conveying semantic number. The most common distinction is between singular and plural, but other languages possess three or even four grammatical numbers. Fijian, for example, has singular, dual, trial and plural. Since we use labels like *masculine*, *feminine* and *neuter* to refer to the different possibilities within the category of gender, it would appear that this too is a category for which it is easy to supply a semantic interpretation. In fact gender systems often have little to do with the semantic division between male, female and neuter. Male beings may be grammatically feminine or neuter. In French *la sentinelle* (sentry) is feminine but normally male, and the grammatical system requires that inanimate nouns no less than animate nouns should be assigned to one of the two genders. The direct semantic vacuousness of some gender systems is perhaps indicated by the fact that although gender is a feature of nouns, there are examples, of which French is one, of languages where the noun itself is not marked for gender, although other words which are in concord with the noun (adjectives and articles in the case of French) do show it. In cases like this the role of gender is to express syntactic relations in much the same way as case and word-order may.