# The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching

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# Preface

'Communicative Language Teaching' has in recent years become a fashionable term to cover a variety of developments in syllabus design and, to a lesser extent, in the methodology of teaching foreign languages. Teachers and applied linguists wishing to examine the fundamental arguments underlying these developments have had to rely on the publications of the Council of Europe, many of which are difficult to obtain, and on access to journals and conference proceedings which few libraries stock. This book attempts to collect many of the important papers in this field, and especially those with relevance to the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. It is hoped that through these papers it will be possible to trace the major linguistic influences on language teaching from theory through to practical application in syllabus design and teaching materials. At the same time, the few papers which have been specially written for this volume relate the linguistic theory to the broader educational context. The papers in the first three sections illustrate the foundations of the communicative approach, the state of the argument at the time it began to be implemented in teaching materials. Most contributors have subsequently modified their positions, but these papers represent the approach in its purest form.

Language teaching, as a practical rather than a theoretical activity, draws on insights from many disciplines, and the emphasis here on broadly linguistic and sociolinguistic discussion is not intended to suggest that language teaching has been responsive only to these. The problem has been where to draw a convenient boundary. We felt that the general positions held by Hymes and Halliday—described in detail in the introduction—are central to any contemporary discussion of language teaching. There would certainly be room for another book of this length taking the argument further back historically, and further away from linguistics into the areas of anthropology, semantics, philosophy, social psychology and others which have been neglected here. However, to have attempted to cover such an enormous field in one book would have been foolhardy. The papers in this volume show various attempts to interpret language for classroom use in the light of recent theoretical

developments which the authors see as significant. Any contemporary student of language teaching needs to evaluate such discussion, and it is hoped that this book will enable many more people to do so.

We would particularly like to thank Alan Davies for his helpful comments at many stages in the preparation of this book.

KJ CJB
November 1978

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SECTION ONE

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[It is often said that language teaching in the past few decades has shifted the emphasis away from (in Newmark & Reibel's terms) 'mastery of language use to mastery of language structure' (1968: 232). This emphasis on the teaching of structure has manifested itself in many ways. We have come to see the task of syllabus design, for example, as very much one of selecting structural items and grading them in suitable order for teaching. Our syllabuses have often been little more than ordered lists of structures, which we have then proceeded to teach by means of a strategy that has become all but universal. The strategy works like this: we present a structure, drill it, practise it in context . . . then move to the next structure (see Brumfit, this volume, p. 183). In this way we gradually, and in Wilkins' term (1976: 3) 'synthetically' build up the inventory of structural items our students can handle. And since we specify and execute our language teaching in such terms, it is natural that we should assess it in a similar way. We reward structural correctness and chastise structural inaccuracy. Success or failure in language learning, as interpreted both through examination results and through student or teacher judgement, has generally come to be assessed in terms of ability to manipulate the structures of the language.

'Mastery of language use'—teaching the student how 'to mean' as well as how 'to form' has not of course been entirely neglected. If (to employ a distinction made by Wilkins and others) we speak of meaning as having 'conceptual' ('semantico-grammatical', 'notional') and 'functional' levels, then both levels have received some attention in past language teaching, though in important respects their treatment has been inadequate. But no teacher introduces 'shall' and 'will' (for example) without relating the structure implicitly or explicitly to a

conceptual meaning, usually that of futurity; nor would we teach (or be able to teach) the English article system without recourse to the concepts of countableness and uncountableness. Similarly, questions of conceptual meaning have always had a place in course design. Many courses, for example, contain a teaching unit contrasting simple past and present perfect tenses, often on the assumption not that the formal contrast will cause difficulty, but that the conceptual distinctions (like 'finished action irrelevant to the present' versus 'finished action relevant to the present') are hard for many to grasp. Similarly a course may (as in Broughton 1968: 243) treat formally different structures like 'the boy's leg' and 'the leg of the chair' in the same teaching unit because they share a conceptual feature (attribution) yet at the same time distinguish themselves conceptually (animate versus inanimate).

Nor has meaning as 'function' been entirely neglected. Language *has* been used to some communicative purpose in classroom practice (for *greeting*, *requesting and giving information*, *giving commands*, and the like) even if the purposes have been restricted and such practice over-sparse. Certainly to represent past language teaching as having taken place in a kind of communicative vacuum in which structures are learned like mathematical formulae, would be an oversimplification.

With these reservations it still remains true that 'form' rather than 'meaning' has dominated our teaching. Why should this have been so? How indeed is the direction that language teaching will follow determined at any point in history? The answer to this second question (which subsumes the first) will be provided partly by the linguist. For his view of language will influence, though not entirely determine, the language teacher's formulation of what the task of language learning involves. The linguist's answer to the question 'what is language?' will usually find reflection in the language teacher's answer to the question 'what knowledge and what skills are involved in language proficiency?'.

So it is that the language teacher's emphasis over the past few decades runs parallel to a similar emphasis within linguistics (or, more precisely, American linguistics) during the same period. The parallel is not hard to demonstrate. The proclaimed characteristic feature of Bloomfieldian and neo-Bloomfieldian American structuralism was its careful concern to restrict itself to the study of form, and the classification of the forms of a language, without reference to the categories of meaning. Linguistics was, almost exclusively, the study of language structure. Then, in the late fifties, Chomsky published his *Syntactic Structures*, and this event heralded the arrival of transformational generative grammar. The transformational theory of grammar does indeed represent a revolution in the aims of linguistic study. Taxonomic classification of structures is no longer considered adequate, and from thenceforth linguists became concerned with developing systems of

rules which account for, rather than merely describe by means of lists, the structural possibilities of a language. Yet transformational grammar shares one fundamental characteristic with structural linguistics: it is the importance given to the study of language structure. In Chomsky's model syntax remains central, and however much this model has changed the aims and techniques of linguistic study, the concern with syntactic structure remains. Linguistics—in Chomsky as in Bloomfield—is by and large the study of language structure. Perhaps this is why transformational grammar, so revolutionary in linguistics, has had such little effect on language teaching. After all, the most it can offer is alternative strategies for teaching grammar—new ways of teaching the same thing.

The language teacher's emphasis on mastery of structure is, then, paralleled by a similar emphasis within linguistics. And in both fields a parallel reaction has taken place. It is a reaction against the view of language as a set of structures; it is a reaction towards a view of language as communication, a view in which meaning and the uses to which language is put play a central part. In language teaching this reaction is crystallizing itself into the 'communicative approach' which is the subject of this volume, and our exploration of the background to this approach will take us into an investigation of the ways in which general linguistic studies have manifested a parallel reaction.

A particularly powerful and lucid expression of discontent with the transformational view of linguistic study is found in Hymes' paper 'On Communicative Competence', quoted at length below. A large part of this paper is taken up with a discussion of two concepts central to Chomsky's theory: the concepts of 'competence' and 'performance'. Hymes is critical of the way Chomsky uses these terms, and in the latter part of his paper he formulates his own redefinition.

For Chomsky it is 'competence' defined as 'the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language' (1965: 4) which is the prime concern of linguistic theory. Competence is an idealization: it is the knowledge of the 'ideal speaker-listener' operating within 'a completely homogeneous speech community'. It distinguishes itself from 'performance' which is seen as 'the actual use of language in concrete situations'. As Chomsky says (and Hymes quotes), 'a record of natural speech will show numerous false starts, deviations from rules, changes of plan in mid-course, and so on'. In these senses performance represents both an incomplete and a degenerate reflection of the ideal speaker-listener's competence, and as such is considered to be of little relevance to the theoretical and descriptive linguist.

In its original form Hymes' paper was delivered at a conference on language development among disadvantaged children, and in its first section Hymes points to the irrelevance of the Chomskian notion of

competence—dealing as it does with the ideal speaker-listener in a homogeneous speech community—to the study of disadvantaged children. Indeed, says Hymes, what one is inevitably concerned with in such a study is 'performance'—the actual use of language in a concrete situation; its use moreover by speaker-listeners who are far from 'ideal' and whose language behaviour cannot be characterized as that of any 'homogeneous speech community'. Sociocultural factors, which for Chomsky are again associated with the realm of performance, will prove of prime importance in studies of this kind. For Hymes, Chomskian linguistics with its narrow concept of competence represents a 'Garden of Eden view' which dismisses central questions of use by relegating them to the area of performance. Indeed, it is a major characteristic of modern linguistics that (as Hymes says in a quotation directly relevant to the theme of this volume)

> 'it takes structure as a primary end in itself, and tends to depreciate use. . . .' (this volume, p. 8).

In the second section of his paper, Hymes exemplifies situations in which non-ideal speaker-listeners operate within a non-homogeneous speech community, situations in which one finds 'differential competence within a heterogeneous speech community'. He argues that linguistics in general (concerned with issues going far beyond the study of disadvantaged children) requires a theory which will take account of such phenomena. A theory of this sort would give central importance (a 'constitutive role') to sociocultural factors.]

* * *

# On communicative competence[1]

D. H. Hymes

## I

This paper is theoretical. One connotation of 'theoretical' is 'programatic'; a related connotation is that one knows too little about the subject to say something practical. Both connotations apply to this attempt to contribute to the study of the 'language problems of disadvantaged children'. Practical work however, must have an eye on the current state of theory, for it can be guided or misguided, encouraged or discouraged, by what it takes that state to be. Moreover, the language development of children has particular pertinence just now for theory. The fundamental theme of this paper is that the theoretical and the practical problems converge.

It is not that there exists a body of linguistic theory that practical research can turn to and has only to apply. It is rather that work motivated by practical needs may help build the theory that we need. To a great extent programs to change the language situation of children are an attempt to apply a basic science that does not yet exist. Let me review the present stage of linguistic theory to show why this is so.

Consider a recent statement, one that makes explicit and precise an assumption that has underlain much of modern linguistics (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3):

> Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.

From the standpoint of the children we seek to understand and help such a statement may seem almost a declaration of irrelevance. All the difficulties that confront the children and ourselves seem swept from view.

One's response to such an indication of the state of linguistic theory might be to ignore fundamental theory and to pick and choose among its products. Models of language structure, after all, can be useful in

ways not envisioned in the statements of their authors. Some linguists (e.g., Labov, Rosenbaum, Gleitman) use transformational generative grammar to study some of the ways in which a speech community is not homogeneous and in which speaker-listeners clearly have differential knowledge of a language. Perhaps, then, one ought simply to disregard how linguists define the scope of 'linguistic' theory. One could point to several available models of language—Trager-Smith-Joos, tagmemic, stratificational, transformational-generative (in its MIT, Pennsylvania, Harvard and other variants), and, in England, 'system-structure' (Halliday and others); remark that there are distinguished scholars using each to analyse English; regret that linguists are unable to agree on the analysis of English; and pick and choose, according to one's problem and local situation, leaving grammarians otherwise to their own devices.

To do so would be a mistake for two reasons: on the one hand, the sort of theoretical perspective quoted above *is* relevant in ways that it is important always to have in mind; on the other hand, there is a body of linguistic data and problems that would be left without theoretical insight, if such a limited conception of linguistic theory were to remain unchallenged.

The special relevance of the theoretical perspective is expressed in its representative anecdote (to use Kenneth Burke's term), the image it puts before our eyes. The image is that of a child, born with the ability to master any language with almost miraculous ease and speed; a child who is not merely molded by conditioning and reinforcement, but who actively proceeds with the unconscious theoretical interpretation of the speech that comes its way, so that in a few years and with a finite experience, it is master of an infinite ability, that of producing and understanding in principle any and all grammatical sentences of language. The image (or theoretical perspective) expresses the essential equality in children just as human beings. It is noble in that it can inspire one with the belief that even the most dispiriting conditions can be transformed; it is an indispensable weapon against views that would explain the communicative differences among groups of children as inherent, perhaps racial.

The limitations of the perspective appear when the image of the unfolding, mastering, fluent child is set beside the real children in our schools. The theory must seem, if not irrelevant, then at best a doctrine of poignancy: poignant, because of the difference between what one imagines and what one sees; poignant too, because the theory, so powerful in its own realm, cannot on its terms cope with the difference. To cope with the realities of children as communicating beings requires a theory within which sociocultural factors have an explicit and constitutive role; and neither is the case.

For the perspective associated with transformational generative grammar, the world of linguistic theory has two parts: linguistic *competence* and linguistic *performance*. Linguistic competence is understood as concerned with the tacit knowledge of language structure, that is, knowledge that is commonly not conscious or available for spontaneous report, but necessarily implicit in what the (ideal) speaker-listener can say. The primary task of theory is to provide for an explicit account of such knowledge, especially in relation to the innate structure on which it must depend. It is in terms of such knowledge that one can produce and understand an infinite set of sentences, and that language can be spoken of as 'creative', as *energeia*. Linguistic performance is most explicitly understood as concerned with the processes often termed encoding and decoding.

Such a theory of competence posits ideal objects in abstraction from sociocultural features that might enter into their description. Acquisition of competence is also seen as essentially independent of sociocultural features, requiring only suitable speech in the environment of the child to develop. The theory of performance is the one sector that might have a specific sociocultural content; but while equated with a theory of language use, it is essentially concerned with psychological by-products of the analysis of grammar, not, say, with social interaction. As to a constitutive role for sociocultural features in the acquisition or conduct of performance, the attitude would seem quite negative. Little or nothing is said, and if something were said, one would expect it to be depreciatory. Some aspects of performance are, it is true, seen as having a constructive role (e.g., the cycling rules that help assign stress properly to sentences), but if the passage quoted at the outset is recalled, however, and if the illustrations of performance phenomena in the chapter from which the passage comes are reviewed, it will be seen that the note struck is persistently one of limitation, if not disability. When the notion of performance is introduced as 'the actual use of language in concrete situations', it is immediately stated that only under the idealization quoted could performance directly reflect competence, and that in actual fact it obviously could not. 'A record of natural speech will show numerous false starts, deviations from rules, changes of plan in mid-course, and so on.' One speaks of primary linguistic data as 'fairly degenerate in quality' (Chomsky, 1965, p. 31), or even of linguistic performance as 'adulteration' of ideal competence (Katz, 1967, p. 144). While 'performance' is something of a residual category for the theory, clearly its most salient connotation is that of imperfect manifestation of underlying system.

I do not think the failure to provide an explicit place for sociocultural features to be accidental. The restriction of competence to the notions of a homogeneous community, perfect knowledge, and independence

of sociocultural factors does not seem just a simplifying assumption, the sort that any scientific theory must make. If that were so, then some remark to that effect might be made; the need to include a sociocultural dimension might be mentioned; the nature of such inclusion might even be suggested. Nor does the predominant association of performance with imperfection seem accidental. Certainly any stretch of speech is an imperfect indication of the knowledge that underlies it. For users that share the knowledge, the arrangement might be thought of as efficient. And if one uses one's intuitions as to speech, as well as to grammar, one can see that what to grammar is imperfect, or unaccounted for, may be the artful accomplishment of a social act (Garfinkel, 1970), or the patterned, spontaneous evidence of problem solving and conceptual thought (John, 1967, p. 5). These things might be acknowledged, even if not taken up.

It takes the absence of a place for sociocultural factors, and the linking of performance to imperfection, to disclose an ideological aspect to the theoretical standpoint. It is, if I may say so, rather a Garden of Eden view. Human life seems divided between grammatical competence, an ideal innately-derived sort of power, and performance, an exigency rather like the eating of the apple, thrusting the perfect speaker-hearer out into a fallen world. Of this world, where meanings may be won by the sweat of the brow, and communication achieved in labor (cf. Bonhoffer, 1965, p. 365), little is said. The controlling image is of an abstract, isolated individual, almost an unmotivated cognitive mechanism, not, except incidentally, a person in a social world.

Any theoretical stance of course has an ideological aspect, and that aspect of present linguistic theory is not its invention. A major characteristic of modern linguistics has been that it takes structure as a primary end in itself, and tends to depreciate use, while not relinquishing any of its claim to the great significance that is attached to language. (Contrast classical antiquity, where structure was a means to use, and the grammarian subordinate to the rhetor.) The result can sometimes seem a very happy one. On the one hand, by narrowing concern to independently and readily structurable data, one can enjoy the prestige of an advanced science; on the other hand, despite ignoring the social dimensions of use, one retains the prestige of dealing with something fundamental to human life.

In this light, Chomsky is quite correct when he writes that his conception of the concern of linguistic theory seems to have been also the position of the founders of modern general linguistics. Certainly if modern structural linguistics is meant, then a major thrust of it has been to define the subject matter of linguistic theory in terms of what it is not. In de Saussure's linguistics, as generally interpreted, *la langue* was the privileged ground of structure, and *la parole* the residual realm