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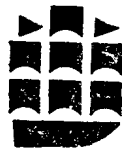
**LINGUISTIC THEORY  
LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTIO  
AND LANGUAGE  
TEACHING**

**Eddy Roulet**

# Linguistic Theory, Linguistic Description and Language Teaching

EDDY ROULET

*Translation by Christopher N. Candlin*



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Whether, however, one adopts the first or the second approach, awareness of the applied potential of formal descriptions and the theoretical premises upon which they are constructed is indispensable for the teacher and syllabus designer. It is in this area of 'awareness of potential' that Professor Roulet's contribution to the *Applied Linguistics and Language Study Series* is most valuable.

In this area, the book devotes considerable space to competing theories: in a readable commentary on central issues, the contribution of structural linguistics as an objective alternative to the fictions and misconceived formulations of traditional school grammars is explored, and in his portrayal of the accepted theoretical and descriptive critiques of generative linguistics to structuralism, Roulet does not fall into the strident trap of assuming that because major *theoretical* objections to structuralism can be raised this necessarily invalidates structural descriptions entirely for language teaching and *applied* purposes. It is in such issues that the author's applied linguistic experience serves him well in mitigating what, in others, is frequently a theoretical stance.

From this critical historical analysis the author is equipped to take the reader to a treatment of the current question in applied linguistics: that if a pedagogical grammar is to be at the basis of language teaching materials, if such materials have as their aim to lead the learner to knowledge of the target language, then both they and the pedagogical grammar must be concerned with the rules of language *use* as they are with the rules of grammaticality and the well-formedness of sentences. In a section specially written for the English translation, Professor Roulet takes up this question of the components of communicative competence and argues, once more from the standpoint of the problem-centred approach, that our awareness of the potential of linguistic theory and linguistic descriptions for language teaching materials and syllabuses must include the pragmatic requirement of a centre on semantics and the sociopsychology of discourse.

Christopher N. Candlin,  
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## Introduction

The problem of applying linguistic theory and linguistic description to modern language teaching is a central concern of linguists and teachers. Sol Saporta noted in 1966: 'A central question in the application of linguistics to the teaching of foreign languages involves the conversion of a scientific grammar into a pedagogical grammar'.<sup>1</sup>

Applied linguists are clear that their discipline cannot be content with deriving information solely from general linguistics or from descriptive linguistics, and that it needs to rely on other disciplines as, for example, psycholinguistics (for the study of learning strategies) or sociolinguistics (for the definition of teaching aims). In addition, they realize the need to redefine the role of linguistic theory and linguistic description amid all the other disciplines which might be able to contribute to renewing and improving language teaching methods.<sup>2</sup> This realization is most apparent in the central and very controversial domain of grammar, where the same kind of questions continually recur: what ought to be the place in the setting out of the content and gradation of a language course of information provided by linguistic theory and linguistic description? What kind of grammar are we to teach?<sup>3</sup> The problem becomes all the more important when one takes into account the fact that the information provided by linguistic theory and linguistic description not only concerns traditional instruction in grammar and spelling, but all the areas of language learning; performance in writing (composition), understanding material read, oral performance and comprehension and the stylistic study of literary texts, etc., all of which areas considerably enlarge the field of applications. Language teachers, for their part, have abruptly found themselves in a new situation; namely the condemnation of traditional grammar and the proliferation of new grammars for which they have not been prepared. This is partly due to the fact that up until the beginning of the twentieth century, linguistic theory, linguistic description and language teaching were considered as one

## INTRODUCTION

entity; the Port-Royal Grammar<sup>4</sup> is an excellent example. For language teachers as for the public at large there was only a single grammar of French or English, the model for which had been placed somewhere in heaven and from which teachers had only to derive teaching grammars by simplifying and summarizing their exposition while giving out hints and in appending exemplificatory exercises to the stated rules. As a result, writers invested all their effort in devising new ways in which the coursebooks could be presented; choice of terminology, examples, introduction of explanatory and recapitulative tables, the use of colours, illustrations, etc., without, however, modifying the content and without posing to themselves from the outset the problem of the validity of the underlying grammatical description. An example of this tradition, which is still very much alive, is the publication of Malzac's: *Grammaire nouvelle du français*<sup>5</sup> which in a radically new form, i.e. in terms of a programmed course, nonetheless reproduces the content of traditional coursebooks. The only advantage of this essentially conservative and repetitive system was that the teacher could content himself in his teaching with grammatical formulations which he had himself received in his own schooling.

The rapid development of linguistic studies in the nineteenth century, in particular in Germany, did little to change matters; comparative linguists were concerned particularly with the study of ancient languages and were interested in the area of linguistic evolution and the genetic relationships between languages which had little to do with the interests of language teachers. It was in the twentieth century with the publication of the works of de Saussure, Palmer and Bloomfield,<sup>6</sup> that a general and descriptive science of linguistics was established which succeeded in overturning traditional grammar and radically modifying our conception of the system and function of language. Although these early studies were especially concerned with the analysis of phonological systems, work on grammatical analysis has predominated since the 1940s, but, anticipating the later necessary and predictable development of more complex research into semantic analysis, the last thirty years have seen the development of at least ten or more models of grammatical analysis which are of general interest and which have already been applied to the description of a number of languages. In America, for example, Wells' Immediate Constituent Analysis,<sup>7</sup> Harris' Distribution Analysis,<sup>8</sup> Pike's Tagmemic Grammar,<sup>9</sup> Lamb's Stratificational Grammar,<sup>10</sup> Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar<sup>11</sup>



and Fillmore's Case Grammar<sup>12</sup> have been developed; and, similarly in Europe, Weisgerber's Content Grammar,<sup>13</sup> Martinet's Functional Syntax,<sup>14</sup> Tesnière's Dependency Grammar<sup>15</sup> and Halliday's Scale and Category Grammar.<sup>16</sup> It follows from such a list that there is no longer a single grammar of contemporary English or contemporary French, but numerous descriptions which often reflect very different conceptions of the system of language and of the strategies of language acquisition. Consequently, language teachers, becoming more and more aware of the gaps in traditional manuals, were no longer able to evade the question of what grammar to teach. Furthermore, certain models like Transformational Generative Grammar resorted to such abstract, complex and formal descriptions that teachers asked themselves with some justification how desirable, let alone possible it was for them to apply such recent models of grammar to the teaching of modern languages. Thus, despite the urgent need for co-operation, it appears as if a gulf is widening today between the work of linguists and the practical problems of language teachers. Frustrated by linguistic theories and grammatical descriptions which their inadequate linguistic training prevents them from understanding and evaluating, and irritated by the advice of general linguists or, indeed, applied linguists who often are unaware of pedagogical theory and practice, language teachers end up by losing all interest in the problem and retire within themselves, content with their experience and their prescriptions for teaching practice borrowed from this or that source.

This cannot be a satisfactory solution. Present controversy and vacillation on the application of linguistics to language teaching ought to serve in no way as an alibi for the return to traditional teaching or the elaboration of a simple collection of prescriptions for the utilization of audio-visual techniques as is all too often maintained today. G. Helbig makes the issue quite clear; 'It is not only a question today of modernizing the teaching of foreign languages by the use of language laboratories and audio-visual methods but also of obtaining through a clear understanding of modern linguistics much deeper insights into the system and function of language. This is the only way of assuring the success of language teaching in the long run.'<sup>17</sup>

There is no doubt that recent linguistic theories and grammatical descriptions have an important contribution to make to the modernizing of language teaching but at the same time it has to be admitted that the relationships between linguistic theory, the linguistic description of a single language, and a language teaching course are not

as simple or as direct as one has in recent years perhaps too often thought them to be. As Wardhaugh points out: 'Too often in the past, the assumption has been made that linguistic technique could be made into a pedagogical technique or that apparent insights into linguistic structure achieved by linguists should be communicated rather directly to learners'.<sup>18</sup> The explanation of the relationships which hold between linguistic theory, the description of a single language and language teaching itself constitutes one of the central problems of applied linguistics in its concern with language teaching.

This book does not claim to put forward an established model for these relationships; we are not yet equipped with all the necessary components for such a model, in particular in the areas of language acquisition and language use. What can be proposed while referring as precisely and as often as possible to source materials, is an indication of representative ideas and most current applications; i.e.:

(1) A recapitulation of the principal shortcomings which justified a reformation of traditional school grammars.

(2) An indication of what it is that structural and transformational generative grammars can bring to the description and teaching of modern languages and a submission of this contribution to critical examination.

(3) An attempt at distinguishing the varied notions and ideas masked by the label 'Application of a Grammatical Model to Language Teaching', by reference to the debates and controversies of the last twenty years.

(4) An attempt to define the role of linguistic theory and linguistic description and more generally of linguistics as a whole, among those disciplines which have been called upon to contribute to an updating of language teaching methods.

## NOTES

- 1 'Applied Linguistics and Generative Grammar' p. 81.
- 2 cf. Pit Corder: *Applied Linguistics: Various Interpretations and Practices* 1971.
- 3 cf. G. Nickel: 'Welche Grammatik für den Fremdsprachenunterricht?' and J. C. Chevalier: 'Quelle grammairre enseigner?'.
- 4 Arnault and Lancelot: *Grammaire générale et raisonnée*.
- 5 cf. the review by C. Müller in *Bulletin CILA*, 14, 1971 pp. 54-58.
- 6 F. de Saussure: *Course in General Linguistics* 1916 (trans W. Baskin). H. E. Palmer: *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages* 1917. L. Bloomfield: *Language* 1933.

## Traditional Grammar

No doubt one can find as many traditional grammars as there are traditional grammarians and traditional manuals. Nevertheless, manuals of school grammar all fall into a certain number of characteristic errors which have often been pointed out by linguists<sup>1</sup> and can be usefully recalled at this point. This does not simply, however, totally rejecting traditional grammar as did the structuralists. In his book *Cartesian Linguistics*, Chomsky has shown pertinently that certain traditional works, for example the Port-Royal Grammar, presented a description of grammatical facts more accurate and more complete than that of a number of so-called structural grammars. Lyons, in his excellent *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* gives a timely reminder of the richness and delicacy of traditional analysis while pointing out that these are qualities which have been about for a long time in the majority of school grammar books.

Having once made this clear, however, it is still necessary to make the point that an examination of traditional school grammars indicates that they act as useful aids neither to the mastery of oral expression nor to that of written expression; both important objectives of modern language teaching. As to mastering oral and written comprehension, one might have been able to say more about that if it had ever been considered as an integral part of traditional teaching. In fact, the implicit aim of traditional school grammars, teaching the pupil to construct correct sentences, could not be achieved because of the nature of the *content* of these grammars and their manner of *presentation*<sup>2</sup> of grammatical data. Beginning with *content*, there are six major gaps (among others) which are characteristic of the majority of school grammars and which are damaging to modern language teaching practice:

(1) *Traditional manuals take no account of present-day language usage and impose norms generally derived from the language of the great authors of previous centuries.*

J. C. Chevalier writes: 'Too many grammars are still full of all kinds of expressions which nobody or practically nobody uses any longer, while, on the contrary, paying no attention to frequent colloquial usage.'<sup>3</sup> Like the teacher, the grammarian sets himself up as a legislator and adopts prescriptive attitudes. It is very natural that in order to support his authority, he should refer to the great authors of the past. To be clear on this point, it is enough to look at a work which, although it was not written for this particular goal, is still frequently used for the teaching of French to foreigners: Grévisse's *Précis de grammaire française*. A rapid run through this work shows that a third of the examples are made up of quotations from great authors, half of which are 17th Century writers. We could accept this if it were simply a matter of extracts from prose texts, where the examples in question show a number of points in common with contemporary French, but a hundred or so of the examples are taken from the poetry of La Fontaine and Racine as for example:

'Moi, qui, grâce aux dieux, de courage me pique, En ai pris la fuite de peur', which can hardly be considered as representative of present-day language usage. Further, is it necessary to fall back on the authority of Molière:

'Aucun juge par vous ne sera visité?'<sup>5</sup> to justify the usage of *aucun* if in presenting it to the student you do not warn him of a use of the interrogative which is not current today?

Whatever interests a certain category of students may have in classical or poetic language, the grammarian ought first to describe the language in current use; it is that language which the students rely on for daily communication. As an example, traditional manuals for the most part omit constructions current in contemporary French, in particular in the area of interrogative constructions. If we take the nuclear interrogation with *où, quand, pourquoi, comment, combien* as an example, Grévisse seems to admit constructions of the type *où va-t-il?*, *où va ton père?*, *où ton père va-t-il?*<sup>6</sup>, and as an *emphatic* form *où est-ce que tu vas?*<sup>7</sup> The intuition of present-day speakers of French would not accord this last form any more emphasis or insistence than the others. Furthermore, the researches of the *Français Fondamental*<sup>8</sup> group have shown that the above four forms make up only a little more than half of the forms currently in use in the fifties: the following is a summary (the numbers refer to the five morphemes mentioned above):

où va ton père?	134	168 forms allowed by Grévisse
où va-t-il?	4	
où ton père va-t-il?	30	139 forms excluded
où est-ce qu'il va?	45	
il va où?	77	
où il va?	12	
où c'est qu'il va?	5	

These figures plainly show that this particular manual is treating a language which is not at all representative of the spoken French of the fifties (without mentioning the language of the sixties which would doubtless provide even more surprising figures!) It is not the suggestion that it is necessary to teach the use of all these forms in class but since pupils will have to hear them and understand them sooner or later, perhaps it is better to avoid unpleasant surprises by presenting them with the facts. This is more especially true since there are worse consequences of a too normative teaching method: pupils rapidly realize that there is a divorce between the language they study in class and the language they spontaneously use as a mother tongue or hear around them as a second language. At this point they rapidly lose interest in learning grammar.

(2) *Even the most recent traditional manuals only describe the written language and either take no account of the spoken language or mix the two codes.* Take the following rule, presented in an English coursebook very much in use in Swiss and French schools and which appears very modern (illustrations, phonetic transcriptions, substitution tables, etc.):

'The majority of words form their plural by adding an 's' which is pronounced. For example: a boy, two boys [boiz]'.<sup>9</sup> Notice that this example in fact contradicts the rule—the *s* of *boys* is not pronounced as [s]—and although the authors mention further on plurals in *-es* and *-ies* in the written language, they do not treat the distribution of the forms [s], [z] and [iz] in spoken language. Similar remarks hold true for the rules for the formation of the third person singular of the Simple Past.

1. The regular simple past is formed by adding *ed* to the infinitive stem, e.g. (call) called, (open) opened.

2. When the infinitive stem of the verb ends in *e* you add a *d*, e.g. (smile) smiled.

3. For monosyllabic verbs ending in a single consonant preceded by a single vowel, you double the final consonant before adding *ed*, e.g. (stop) stopped, (clap) clapped.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, we have a good many observations on the forms of the written language but no allusions to the nature and distribution of the spoken language forms [d], [t], [id] although very different from those of the written language. In the same way, no account is taken of the fact that forms taught as special or exceptional cases in written language are perfectly regular in the spoken language; [kaeriz] is formed on the same model as [pleiz], and [rɑbd] on the same model as [kɔ:ld] even though *carries* is a special case in the written code (ending *-ies*) as is *rubbed* (doubling of the final consonant).

In speaking of manuals for the teaching of French, E. Wagner notes, perfectly correctly, that these courses 'aimed at both Frenchmen and foreign learners begin from a hypothesis which is constantly present, if not formulated, namely, that the linguistic activity of the speaker remains the same whether it is a question of using the spoken language or the written. Differences of use, whether in the lexicon or in the grammar or in the phonology are passed over in silence or minimised'.<sup>11</sup> Modern linguistic research has exhaustively shown that the spoken language is organized into a system which, to a remarkable extent, is different from the system of the written language. This is particularly striking in French and in English. Csecsy has demonstrated this in his study of the morphology of the French verb<sup>12</sup> and Dubois, after comparing gender and number forms in spoken and written French and their distribution says that: 'A systematic and parallel study of equivalent utterances in the spoken and written code makes quite clear the dissymmetry of the two systems and their relatively autonomous function'.<sup>13</sup> Grammars which distinguish the two codes are quite rare and course books which do so as, for example, Mauger,<sup>14</sup> do not manage to avoid confusion. As an example, the following is the general rule given for the formation of the feminine of nouns.

'In writing, an *e* is added to the masculine singular; in spoken French, consonants which are thus rendered intervocalic are pronounced:

—ais: un Anglais, une Anglaise

—ain: un châtelain, une châtelaine etc'.<sup>15</sup>

Notice here that the examples are solely concerned with the written language and the rule given for the spoken language is incomplete in that it fails to refer to the existence of denasalization.

If one admits that the structures of the spoken language are quite different from those of the written language and that traditional

manuals systematically present only the structures of the written language, at best, or produce a confusion between the two codes, and if one acknowledges that teachers in general do not have the two codes, and if one acknowledges that teachers in general do not have an explicit satisfactory knowledge of the spoken language, one is driven to the conclusion that the information provided by traditional grammars cannot enable pupils to attain one of the fundamental objectives of modern language learning, the acquisition of a mechanism for oral communication.

(3) *Traditional coursebooks devote a great deal of time to secondary grammatical points (in particular orthography) but pay little attention to important constructions.* In this way, Grévisse's *Précis* which runs to three hundred pages, devotes three pages to nouns with double gender (pp. 64-67), seven to the words *tout*, *même* and *quelque* (pp. 108-114) and twelve to participial agreement (208-219) but does not treat the structure of different types of noun phrase at all. Each of the constituents of the phrases: *tous les petits enfants noirs*, *le jour le plus long*, *un tout petit animal blessé*, is presented from the point of view of its semantics and morphology in one or other chapters of the work, but the foreign student will not be able to find rules for combining these elements anywhere so as to allow him to produce the noun phrases in question. This is because traditional coursebooks in general prefer to teach the student how to avoid the most common exceptions to the norm rather than lead him to construct utterances. 'The student studies all those things which he ought to avoid but he doesn't learn what he ought to do' as L. F. and A. P. Nilsen pertinently note.<sup>16</sup>

(4) *More generally, traditional coursebooks give a predominant place to morphology, and neglect syntax.* To justify this comment it is only necessary to point out the part accorded in grammars of French to the morphology of nouns and adjectives where authors usually set out exhaustive lists of all the idiosyncratic cases (adjectives which only apply to feminine nouns: *cochère*, *dire*, *grège*, *pie*, *poulinière*, *suitée*, *théologale*, *trémère*, *vomique*, or to masculines: *aquilin*, *pers*, *saur*, etc.),<sup>17</sup> while the use of the pronoun *en*, albeit very complex,<sup>18</sup> is dismissed in a page and a half.<sup>19</sup> The same is true when one looks at the chapter on the verb, where a large section of it (forty pages in Grévisse and in Mauger) is given over to morphology. As a result, syntactic information on the organization of the verb phrase, of extreme importance to the construction of utterances, is simply absent. Since his information is also not generally to be found in dictionaries, foreign

learners of French are left to themselves. Grévisse<sup>20</sup> and Mauger<sup>21</sup> hardly treat at all a process as interesting and productive as that of causative transformations in French which permit the formation of one phrase from another by the introduction of a new agent as in:

les enfants mangent la soupe → la bonne fait [les enfants mangent la soupe] → la bonne fait manger la soupe aux enfants

la secrétaire envoie une convocation à tous les membres → le directeur a fait [la secrétaire envoie une convocation à tous les membres]

→ le directeur a fait envoyer une convocation à tous les membres par la secrétaire.

les enfants sont tristes → la pluie fait [les enfants sont tristes] → la pluie rend les enfants tristes.<sup>22</sup>

Only the *Grammaire Larousse du français contemporain* devotes two pages to it (pp. 326–327) but without presenting any systematic rules. It is obviously more important for communication to know how to construct an utterance than to know how to put together all its constituents correctly in their variant combinations.

(5) *A corollary of this is where traditional grammars do not set out rules enabling the learner to construct systematically correct complex sentences.* All types of main and dependent clauses are set out clearly through the grammars but what are absent are the rules permitting the combination of several clauses for the construction of more and more complex structures. In this area the pupil, or more seriously the teacher, is left entirely to himself. If the teaching of written expression continues to be left to chance and uncertain methods, this is in large measure due to the weakness of manuals of traditional grammar.

(6) *Finally, outside the area of morphology and syntax, the treatment of lexis and phonology is very often inadequate.* Thus Grévisse presents the sounds of French from a strictly *phonetic*<sup>23</sup> point of view despite the fact that it is the phonological system which is of greatest interest for the pupil studying his mother tongue and of the most use for those who study it as a foreign language. Furthermore, Grévisse takes no account of those highly important phenomena for the learning of French as a foreign language, e.g. the use of schwa, and vocalic and consonantal liaison.<sup>24</sup> In short, the information he does provide cannot in any way be seen to support the systematic teaching of pronunciation and reading. As to the presentation of lexical sets, homonyms, paronyms, synonyms and antonyms,<sup>25</sup> this is too frequently too elementary and takes no account at all of syntagmatic



relations or collocational relations, the importance of which Galisson has shown for the learning of vocabulary.<sup>26</sup>

If these are important gaps in the content of such works, they are even more serious in the lay-out or presentation of the grammar.

1. *Traditional grammars present definitions, rules and explanations very frequently of a logicosemantic character which are insufficiently explicit, often false and therefore both dangerous and of little value.* As an example, in one of the most recent grammars to appear the author gives the following definition:

'A sentence is a more or less complex expression offering the complete sense of a thought, feeling or wish'.<sup>27</sup>

This is a definition so vague that it would apply perfectly adequately to a word, to a sentence, to a paragraph, to a chapter or indeed to a book; it is of little value as a definition and does not allow the student to grasp what a sentence is if he did not already intuitively know it. What use is there in talking about complexity in imprecise terms like 'more or less'? This feature does not in any way describe the nature of the complex sentence. How is one to define a complete sense; and a thought, a feeling, a wish? A hundred informants would produce a hundred different definitions of these terms. If you were then to add them up you would produce just as many definitions of the sentence. As a further example the same publication gives a definition of the direct object:

'The *object* of the verb is the term indicating the being or the object acted upon'.<sup>28</sup>

Such a definition is still false because it would apply equally easily to the subjects of sentences: *Jean a reçu une gifle* and *Jean a été renversé par une voiture*. One could cite a large number of examples to provide evidence for the weakness of traditional grammars on this point; one would then see just how many rules, definitions and explanations are either confusing or incomprehensible. Given then that numerous items of grammatical information are not set out explicitly by the author, it appears to teachers and pupils that they must derive the rules for themselves from the few examples which are given them. What follows is that the more teachers and pupils you have, the more different interpretations you have and as a result the more possible errors you have. K. Schap presents a similar criticism of the rules proposed by traditional grammar for the teaching of composition:

'Although the traditionalist may have good intuitions about his