

LINGUISTICS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

D. A. Wilkins

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Preface

I have written *Linguistics in Language Teaching* for teachers of foreign languages including English as a foreign language. It is not an introduction to linguistics, nor is it a book on methodology. It is an attempt to bridge the gap between the two, to investigate how legitimately knowledge of linguistics contributes to the taking of decisions about language teaching. I have assumed that the reader has some familiarity with the methodology of language teaching but no previous knowledge of linguistics. It is most suitable, therefore, for the teacher about to start a course in linguistics or applied linguistics, or who wishes to see whether such a course is worth undertaking. I hope that it can also be read with benefit by teachers in training and with interest by students and teachers of general linguistics.

In order to give a balanced view of the field of linguistics, I have been deliberately eclectic. Parts of the discussion owe much to early structuralism, some to later developments in transformational generative linguistics, and others to Hallidayian linguistics. I hope I have managed to do this while still retaining overall coherence. Choice from among the different viewpoints—if choice be necessary at all—can only be made from a detailed study of each, and that is not attempted here. Inevitably I have had to be highly selective in the topics I have chosen. No one book could cover the whole of linguistics. This means that some aspects of linguistic enquiry, which could certainly be of interest to teachers, have been omitted. Since I have not been writing about linguistics as such, I have explained the linguistic points only as far as suits my purpose. For fuller treatment readers should turn to the literature on linguistics.

My approach is deliberately naive, in that I take the linguistic point first and then ask what value it has, if any, for language teaching. I do this *not* because I believe that decisions in language teaching follow linguistics in this way, but because I think it makes the issues clearer. In this way we can meet the question of the practical applicability of linguistics head-on. A further advantage of this approach is that it enables me to give the book a conventional linguistic arrangement so as to give the reader some idea of the field of linguistics.

The principal language of exemplification is English. This reflects my own interests and experience, but also the fact that I hope the book can be read both by teachers of English as a foreign language and by teachers of other foreign languages in English-speaking countries. Other examples are from the teaching of French, Spanish and German.

I must acknowledge my debt to all those who contributed to this book whether directly or indirectly. I have incorporated numerous suggestions made by my colleagues at the University of Reading and owe a particular debt to Ron Brasington, Roger Bowers, David Crystal, Malcolm Petyt and Peter Roach. I must also thank Frank Palmer, who gave me great encouragement from the beginning. My final thanks are to my wife. She bore the brunt of my preoccupation with various versions of this text over about three years and must have seen the last of the typescript with a great sense of relief.

1

Linguistic attitudes to language

1.1. Introduction

A person with no knowledge of linguistic science who picks up a modern descriptive Grammar and glances through it, even in a fairly superficial way will be struck by the very strangeness of much that he sees.¹ No doubt he will notice first the new symbols and terminology, which will be quite unlike anything that he remembers of grammar from his schooldays. On a closer reading he may discover that the attitudes to language too are different from those that he himself acquired in the course of his education. If he comes to the conclusion that there is little resemblance between linguistics and 'grammar', we should not be surprised, because for a long time linguists² themselves defined their subject by the ways in which its principles were a rejection of principles followed in traditional grammatical descriptions. In the fifty years or so since this conscious break with tradition, linguistics has developed with considerable vigour. The attempt to start again from scratch, to re-examine all the assumptions and to develop techniques of description that have been thought out afresh, has aroused so much interest in language that linguistics is becoming an autonomous academic discipline. Yet there is little doubt that in retrospect this development of the twentieth century will be seen less as a complete innovation than a fairly violent change of direction in a continuing tradition of language study that stems from the Greeks. Even the conclusions that linguists reach about aspects of the structure of language are not always so very different from those reached by earlier scholars, even if they are presented in new ways. On the other hand, some of the new attitudes are bound to produce new information and new analyses. The

¹ Throughout, the word 'Grammar' is used to indicate a book in which the *grammar* of a language is described.

² By 'linguist' is meant *linguistic scientist* not *polyglot*. 'Linguist' is used consistently in this sense throughout.

focusing on spoken rather than written language, for example, has brought additional data within the range of linguistic study. This range has been extended in other directions by the contact with sociology and psychology. So diverse are the developments in language study that the boundaries of linguistic science are impossible to define.

Linguistics is not about language teaching. It does not follow that because there have been changes in the scholar's study of language there should be related changes in the teaching of foreign languages. But since both linguistics and language teaching have language as their subject-matter, the possibility that each can learn something from the other must be considered.³ If it proves that linguistics does have implications for language teaching, these implications must be fully understood so that they can be used to evaluate our language teaching practices. Language teaching methodology has for centuries been a matter of fashion, because of the very great difficulty of studying it objectively. Linguistics is one of the fields to which language teaching may be referrable, if we are to attain this objectivity. Just how important a place linguistics has in the evaluation of language teaching is something that must be left to the final chapter.

For the moment I want to begin the discussion of how legitimately and in what ways linguistics and language teaching might be related by looking at some of the linguist's attitudes towards language. The attitudes that I shall be referring to are those that represented the break with tradition. The issues are close to many of the assumptions made in language teaching too. We shall see that in some cases the influence of linguistics has been felt directly. In others it is still potential, while elsewhere direct results in language teaching are not to be expected. There are four sections, one on speech and writing, one on form and meaning, a third on descriptive accuracy and the final one on *langue* and *parole*. These are by no means the only issues that characterize the linguist's general view of language. Others will arise in subsequent chapters. The approach adopted here and in other parts of the book, where appropriate, is first to explain the linguistic point as briefly and as simply as possible and then to examine its validity and relevance for language teaching through some fairly detailed exemplification.

³ In practice the assumption is widely held that language teaching stands to gain something from an acquaintance with linguistics. I do not know of any discussion of the other possibility—that linguistics can learn something from language teaching.

1.2. Speech and writing

Linguistics has brought to the study of language a revaluation of the relationship between the spoken and the written forms of the language. Traditionally in the description of languages a much higher status was accorded to the written than to the spoken. It is not difficult to see the reasons for this. In cultures where only a minority was educated, literacy was the significant indication of the educated mind. The educated man was revered for the knowledge to which his literacy gave him access and for the social prominence that his learning gave him. Since, by definition, a literate man is ~~one~~ who can understand written language, it follows that the high regard that attaches to the individual should also attach to the form of the language that only he appreciates. Something that only few people have access to becomes the most valued. What is more, the written language is the repository of the finest literary achievements of a society. If one wishes to discover what is 'finest', what is 'most beautiful', what is, quite simply, 'best', it is to the written literature that one looks. It is not surprising, then, that language of all sorts is evaluated against the norm of the literary language. To the scholar this written language has one further asset. It is permanent. The scholar's references are accessible to all. The literature is a goldfield in which he can hunt for precious samples. Speech is transitory and in the past there was no means of seizing it, of reliving speech events and of making them available to others. It is difficult to assign as much importance to the fleeting as to the permanent and in a literary culture the matter must have seemed beyond question. Grammars have usually been Grammars of the written language.

This is not just a historical point. The attitudes which are the product of the above situation still exist. They are perpetuated by much school teaching and they are widely held by both the more and the less educated. School-teachers devote much energy to eradicating the influence of speech on writing, commonly asserting that the forms produced by pupils are grammatically incorrect. At times children have been required to produce prose modelled on the style of some literary master. Literary masterpieces, it is claimed, embody all that is best in the language and the best most of us can do is to come as close as possible to them in our own style, as a means of improving our control of the language. Written language is held up as a norm for all our uses of language, so that a working-class child is likely either to reject the forms which he associates with his

home or to come to think of language as something which he learns about in school and which can be dismissed from all considerations of serious practical use. That this is the case is suggested by the popular use of the word *language* to mean *written language*. For many people what they speak is not language. It is in some way unworthy of the name. Their speech is a departure from the standard that language represents. Language, in this sense, may be considered as of concern to 'them', but not to 'us'.

Such attitudes towards speech and writing of the mother tongue are not confined to a generally European culture. If one looks elsewhere, there are situations similar to those that now exist or have existed in the past in Britain. In some countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America the level of literacy, though improving, remains low. The attitudes that prevail among literate and non-literate are just those that are described above. Social and economic advancement are obtained through education. Educated men are those that can read and write and, it is believed, one undergoes education in order to be able to read and write. This has consequences for the teaching of foreign languages in such countries. The teacher may well meet the attitude in his pupils that they are not really learning anything until they are being taught to read and write. The teacher who believes in an oral-based methodology or, worse, who may believe that since his pupils' need is to speak the language, they should be taught only speech, may get serious resistance from his pupils, who want to be able to produce the evidence that they are learning a language. For them, being able to speak it does not constitute valid evidence. They know illiterate individuals who have learned to speak the foreign language, especially English, to a degree that permits reasonable communication without any formal instruction at all. Yet they are uneducated men. They are not considered to have learned the language since they remain illiterate. The only evidence that seems acceptable is an ability to read aloud from the text-book or to write a few words. The attitudes to be found reflect mainly the stage of economic and educational development of the country, but this may be complicated by other factors. In Moslem countries the written language has additional status because of its religious significance. The Arabic language is to be found in its 'purest' form in the Koran and the particular forms of Arabic found there have religious sanction. Current spoken forms are perhaps further removed from this than Spanish is from Latin, yet it is the classical form which is considered the model of correctness rather than modern spoken

dialects. To question the importance of the written word is sometimes seen as an attempt to undermine the religious authority stemming from the Koran. In such a case, the teacher ignores his pupils' opinions at his peril.

In the present state of education one doubts whether the reasons for these attitudes are still considered valid. The ability to read and write in the industrially advanced countries is now so general that no special status attaches to it. It is not true either that one of the principal uses of written language is the expression of or exposure to literature. Literature remains the interest of a minority and the majority has chosen to ignore those aspects of language which, at school, they were told to value highly. Indeed there is probably a conscious rejection of literary uses of language precisely *because* they were held up for appreciation in the schools. While it is known that many educated people have an interest in literature, it is also known that many do not and it is certainly well known that material success does not depend on high education. So, written language has lost much of its status.

It was said at the beginning of this section that linguistics had produced a revaluation of the relationship between writing and speech. We have seen that the old attitude involved the elevation of written language. The linguistic attitude attaches the greater importance to speech. For the linguist speech is the primary manifestation of language, and writing is both secondary to it and dependent on it. This is not the place for an extensive discussion of the linguist's reasons, since only the conclusion is relevant to language teaching, not the reasons for it. However, they may be stated briefly as follows:

1. It is part of man's biological nature that he should speak, just as it is that he should walk. Men do not necessarily learn to write. There are many societies where writing is unknown. With physiological, neurological and psychological normality a child will talk.

2. While it cannot be proved that human beings spoke before they wrote at some point on the evolutionary trail, it seems much less plausible to make the contrary assumption.

3. Every individual learns to speak before he learns to write. Indeed he learns to speak whether we 'teach' him or not. It would be much more difficult to learn to write without help. In fact when writing is learned, it is as a representation of speech which has been acquired previously.

4. Languages change and the most potent force for change is

speech. Sound systems seem to be permanently in a state of flux and grammatical systems are not completely stable either. Where change has occurred in speech, the written language may eventually be changed to accommodate it. Where the changes are not made, an increasing difference develops between writing and speech so that the one serves less and less as an accurate guide to the other. Society often resists the change by saying that the new forms are wrong, but whether or not there is any justification for this resistance, it is rarely successful. It is true that certain forms, being restricted in occurrence to written language, may be said to produce change too, but the structural development of a language is much more influenced by speech than by writing.

The linguist, then, has speech as his main subject-matter, and although he would not dismiss written language from his field of study he would relegate it to a secondary position. In describing a language he will be more occupied with its spoken than with its written form. Of course, his description may in some instances be as true of speech as of writing, but we are not entitled to assume that this is the case and rarely is an aspect of the language identical in its two forms.

The primacy of speech is of some importance to the language teacher. Many people have argued that since linguists have shown that 'the speech is the language' and since, as teachers, we aim to teach 'the language', we must set out above all to teach speech even at the risk of excluding written language altogether. Not many people would go as far as that, but it is a characteristic of much modern teaching that the greatest emphasis is placed on speech. Even though this view is not always directly derived from the 'speech is language' base, current language teaching practice has been strongly influenced by a number of people who were both linguists and language teachers and their views on the aims and methodology of language teaching were closely related to their views on the nature of language itself. Believing that speech is language, they advocated the teaching of oral language at a time when few teachers would have done so. War-time and post-war teaching programmes in Britain and the United States were conducted along lines suggested by linguists. The teaching of English as a foreign language especially has long followed an oral approach whose origins might be found in the work between the wars of teacher/linguists like H.E. Palmer.

Still, in spite of the apparent historical influence of such a view,

one is entitled to ask whether the fact that linguists see speech as primary is of any decisive relevance to matters of language teaching at all. Linguistics is concerned with the nature and form of language and even where linguists interest themselves in the ways in which a language is acquired, it is a first rather than a second language that they have in mind. The linguist's interest in language is not in discovering the most efficient means by which a foreign language might be acquired, but in attempting to describe the very complex structure that is the ultimate goal of the learner. The linguist is not qualified to voice an opinion on the means by which the target which he describes should be reached, since different kinds of research are needed to resolve problems of strategies for teaching. Nor does it prove that speech is the only acceptable goal of foreign language teaching. As will be seen in a later chapter, social and personal factors enter into the definition of the goals of language teaching, so that even the target itself is not a matter for the linguist alone. Initially the aims of learning will probably be expressed in sociological and behavioural terms. If the learning of written language is for some reason more important, the fact that speech has a unique status for the linguist is irrelevant. He cannot say that *because* speech is the primary form of language, it should be the major target of language learning. What he can ensure is that the possibility of speech as a valid goal for teaching is given full consideration. Since there have been times when language teaching has been principally *written* language, there is value in the clear articulation of the alternative possibility. In the last three decades linguistics has provided this alternative and has thereby contributed to the redefinition of the goals that has led to the increase in the teaching of spoken language.

Spoken language now has a status in education which it did not previously possess. In the teaching of both the mother tongue and foreign languages the principal goal, I have suggested, has rarely been anything other than proficiency in the written forms, perhaps because speech was not commonly thought of as language. Now in both cases there is a realization that the improvement of skill in spoken expression and understanding is a legitimate goal of language teaching. Pupils developing a facility in oral expression are genuinely improving their mastery of language. Linguistics must take a good deal of the credit for making speech a respectable element in teaching. It would not be surprising to find that the new confidence in self-expression resulting from teaching is of benefit in writing and other

areas of education. To consideration of whether the child expressing himself orally in class is doing something worthwhile, the linguist has something to contribute.

Since the linguist is primarily interested in speech, the Grammars or fragments of Grammars that he produces will be Grammars of the spoken language rather than Grammars of writing. Most people are not accustomed to thinking of grammar as something that is variable. Indeed they do not usually apply the term *grammatical* to speech at all, but think of it as essentially *ungrammatical*. Giving prominence to speech, as he does, the linguist believes that the forms of speech should not be judged by their degree of deviance from written forms, but rather have a grammar of their own which is distinct from the grammar of written language. Now it is obvious that there will be broad similarities in the spoken and written forms of language, but they are not as close as most people would expect. A linguist's description of a language, that is of speech, will therefore be different from the descriptions which are usually available to a teacher, which are, of course, descriptions of writing. This can best be shown by examining an example.

1.2.1. French adjective gender

The common formulation of a rule about the gender of adjectives in French might run as follows. 'Feminine adjectives are formed from the masculine by the addition of an *-e*. Masculine adjectives which already end in *-e* do not change.' To this information one would need to add additional rules concerning adjectives which show further changes such as doubling of the final consonant before suffixation of the *-e*, certain consonant changes, insertion of a further vowel before the *-e*, and placing of an accent on the preceding vowel. In practice these are often learned not as rules but rather as isolated forms when they occur. The following orthographic examples illustrate these rules.

<i>Masculine</i>	<i>Feminine</i>
laid	laide
rouge	rouge
bas	basse
frais	fraîche
long	longue
léger	légère