Language and Understanding

语言与理解

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牛津应用语言学丛书

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出　版　前　言

　　这是一本关于语言与理解的论文集,共收入 10 篇 1991 年剑桥大学夏季讲习班提供的论文。论文作者均为有高级职称的研究人员。论文集出版于 1994 年。其编者为剑桥大学英语及应用语言学研究中心的成员：G·布朗是英语教授、研究中心主任,K·马尔姆克杰尔是研究中心副主任,A·波利特是高级研究员,J·威廉姆斯是研究中心副主任。上述编者对每篇论文都加了按语,点出所述主题与其他论文主题的联系和该主题对语言教学和评估的影响。本书由 H·G·威多森教授担任应用语言学顾问。

　　这些论文主要探讨了心理语言学、语用学、第二语言习得、句法学、话语语言学、语言测试、社会语言学、教育语言学、应用语言学等诸多研究领域与语言及理解相关的问题。论文的作者各抒己见、观点不一,但反映了诸多学科对语言及理解研究的新成果。

　　语言的理解问题是与人类交际本质密切相关的一个基本问题,也是从事语言教学研究学者的重点研究课题之一。这本论文集的主要特色是从多学科的角度来探讨语言的理解问题。过去,各门学科对语言的研究基本上是独立的,缺少交流和联系。而随着时间的推移和研究工作的发展,各门学科逐渐对语言的研究形成了很多共识,例如：认为语言存在着一套可以在不同层次——语音层次、构词层次、组句层次、话语结构层次进行描述的模式,而且"意义"的某些方面可以与每一层次相联系；认为对语言的研究应由多学科协同进行,不提倡单一学科的孤立研究；认为应把语言作为交际的工具,而不是作为篇章、语法和词典的集合来研究；认为研究的对象主要是口语；认为语言是在语境中得到理解的,语言或语言使用的各个方面也应放在具体的语境中研究。许多研究人员对理解的多样化都持肯定的态度,即认为对任何一段话语几乎没有一种单纯的"正确"解释,哪怕弄清了词义和句法结构也不一定能达成一致的理解。

除了上述的共同点外,论文中也表现出由于研究角度不同而产生的主要分歧点。一是对语言的形式或者说语言变量的认识存在着分歧,对什么是标准英语也有不同的见解;二是对语言性质的见解也是众说纷纭。编者指出,在语言的理解这个研究领域,对各门学科阐述的各种观点可以求同存异,它们有互补性,而不是截然对立的,这有助于读者在了解不同观点后对该领域的研究形成整体观念。

编者出版此论文集的意图是:鉴于多种学科新的研究成果很快就为语言教学领域所吸收,应该让应用语言学研究人员和语言教师掌握各门学科对语言与理解研究的最新动态。考虑到进入 80 年代以来对认知过程的研究取得了很大进展,而且对语言学习的研究产生了重大影响,本论文集的重要目的之一就是让读者了解认知过程研究的情况。

本书适用于从事应用语言学研究的人员、该专业的研究生和语言教师。

本社编辑部

Acknowledgements

Preface

In putting together this volume, we have benefited from discussions with the participants in the Summer Institute in English and Applied Linguistics held at Downing College, Cambridge, in July 1991. The participants, young scholars and distinguished academics alike, shared with us and with the contributors to this volume their own insights, drawn from their own varied experience. We have tried to take account of their comments in our introductions to individual contributions, clarifying certain concepts, and drawing out implications for teaching, testing, and research.

We are grateful to the contributors for making their papers available so readily, and for their prompt responses during the editing process; to the Board of Continuing Education, Cambridge University—particularly Dr Richard Mason, Ms Sarah Ormrod, and Ms Julia Wade—for undertaking the administration of the Institute; to The British Council, The University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, The Bell Educational Trust, and Cambridge University Press for their co-operation; to Downing College for providing excellent accommodation in a beautiful setting; and to Cristina Whitecross and David Wilson of Oxford University Press for their advice on the preparation of this book.

The editors
Research Centre for English and Applied Linguistics
University of Cambridge

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Introduction

1   Common ground

This collection of papers originated in a Summer Institute held in Cambridge in 1991 on the theme 'Language and Understanding', which was particularly addressed to applied linguists and to those responsible for the teaching of languages. Whereas recent developments in research in some areas are rapidly assimilated into the language learning/teaching arena because there are well-established lines of communication from researchers to influential applied linguists, developments from other areas are recognized only belatedly as relevant to language teaching. The wide range of coverage in this volume still necessarily omits important current developments in some relevant fields; and there is a deliberate bias towards research in cognitive processing, since this is an area which has made spectacular strides during the 1980s, but which has yet to make a full impact on research into language learning.

Two issues basic to any enquiry into the nature of human knowledge are how language contributes to our understanding of the world, and how our beliefs about the world inform our understanding of language. Anyone concerned with the nature of human communication — and those concerned with the teaching of language inevitably figure large in such a group — must constantly return to such issues. For each one of us, the beliefs we hold about the relationship between language and understanding will tend to be well-entrenched, so they inevitably mesh with other systems of belief. It is hardly surprising to find that many of us hold a range of beliefs which may not be perfectly coherent, because they vary depending on which aspect of language or of understanding we are currently considering.

This book brings together papers from scholars whose approaches to language and to understanding reflect a diversity of views which derive, in part at least, from the different disciplines which they represent. None the less, at many points, there is a commonality in their views about language and about understanding, a commonality which will almost certainly be shared by most readers of this book, which could by no means have been assumed thirty, or — for some of them — even ten, years ago.

All the contributors assume that a language consists, at least, of a set of forms which can be described at various levels — at the level of sounds, word-formation, sentence-formation, and discourse structure — and that

some aspects of 'meaning' can be associated with each of these levels. All of them assume that it is appropriate to study the language synchronically rather than exclusively diachronically. All assume that it is proper to discuss a language not just as a collection of texts, grammars, and dictionaries, but as a vehicle of communication. Similarly, all of them take it for granted that spoken language rather than (or as well as) written language is a proper subject for scholarly study. All of them also assume that particular aspects of language or of language use are properly studied in a context of use, and that different forms will have a range of different functions.

At a fundamental level, there is a similar consensus on the nature of understanding. This is perhaps more surprising since as recently as the early 1980s the standard view of comprehension was that the listener received an auditory stimulus which was then decoded into a meaningful verbal message by a combination of 'bottom up' and 'top down' strategies, after which the listener could be said to 'have' the idea which the speaker had encoded. Indeed, this is a view still quite widely held by scholars working in a wide range of fields. The approach shared by contributors to this volume insists that there is rarely a simple 'correct' interpretation of an utterance, that listeners have to make an effort to work out what speakers mean by what they say. They believe that interpretation is a difficult and risky process with no guarantee of a satisfactory outcome, even if you have correctly identified the words and correctly worked out the syntactic structure of the sentence.

There is, then, to a remarkable degree, a consensus among these contributors about the nature of language and of understanding, despite the range of disciplines which they represent.

2   Individual differences: conflict or complementarity?

2.1   The forms of language—language variability

Most of the papers take for granted a neutral form of English which they do not even have to discuss. This neutral form is Standard English, which is always most easily identified in its written form. The only paper which confronts the issues raised in trying to determine what the term 'language' might refer to, in the case of English, is Milroy's. She shows the difficulty of finding criteria for identifying 'Standard English', particularly in the spoken form. She goes on to show how understanding between native speakers can be imperilled by the diversity of forms encountered, even among those who would be classified as highly educated native speakers of English. The problems which native speakers encounter in understanding each other are likely to be compounded if one of the interlocutors is a foreign learner.

The neutral form assumed by the other contributors is probably not identical for all writers, since each person's construct 'language' must be,

to some extent, an individual construct. For Milroy, a language is not a monolith but a complex network of variants in constant flux. What makes a language that particular language is as much a social as a linguistic question, strikingly so in the case of accents and dialects. Expressions may serve to carry their users' messages, but they also carry social values.

Two other papers focus on how the use of a particular form contributes to a particular meaning by laying down clues which the attentive listener or reader will pick up and use in the search for an interpretation. Both K. Brown and Short examine particular areas of form—meaning relationships; however Brown is concerned with examining the range of syntactic forms available for expressing a range of semantic relationships, whereas Short is concerned with explaining the effect of a particular stylistic choice in a particular context, and with showing that the effect of these choices is just as pervasive in language at large as it is in the language of literature.

Milroy's insistence that language carries social values is certainly a view which would be shared by Aitchison, whose paper documents how the values associated with the culture of a speaker's native language are carried over into the foreign language and culture. Learners of a foreign language bring to the new language the taxonomies of their own language, so their judgements of prototypical categories of familiar lexical fields (animals, vegetables, furniture, and so on) are strikingly different from judgements made by native speakers. In a rather different form, a similar view is expressed by Bialystok, who considers the process of learning a second language to be quite unlike that of learning the first language. The reason is that in learning the first language the child learns not only that particular language, but *language* more generally conceived. Learning the first language is a cognitive problem which involves the acquisition of a cognitive system. The resulting abstract representation of the basic categories of language, the acquired conceptual system, and the ability to analyse and categorize, are all already available in learning a second language, a process which, Bialystok suggests, is confined to learning the linguistic details of the new language. As Aitchison points out, the new language may be used by the learner to communicate ideas which are typically different from those available to native speakers of that language.

2.2 Language and understanding

Whereas the range of views expressed here on the nature of language can, so far, all be seen as complementary, at first sight there does appear to be a diversity in the different authors' conceptions of the relationship between language and understanding.

Milroy, for instance, again focuses centrally on an issue that is only dealt with peripherally in other papers, and that is the issue of social meaning expressed by the choice of forms of language, particularly in speech.

Speakers define their membership of particular social groups by using forms which are peculiar to them, and in choosing a form which includes them as members of the group, they exclude others from it. These subtle social meanings are quite hard even for native speakers from distant areas to pick up, and are particularly difficult for non-native speakers.

The notion of understanding emerging as a function of the social group in which it is embedded also surfaces in Brumfit's paper, though in making a rather different point. He assumes that the desired outcome of the interaction which takes place between learners and teacher in the culture created in the classroom is understanding of the language being taught and learnt. He focuses on the types of conditions most favourable to achieving the desired outcome. Here, sociocultural conditions are considered of paramount importance in directing the search for mutual understanding which is held to be the key to foreign language learning.

In Brumfit's paper, we encounter a view of the nature of understanding which seems initially to be quite different from that which is assumed by most of the other contributors (and it may actually reflect a fundamentally different view on the nature of language). Brumfit's account of understanding is that it is a basically social process. He is concerned with the role of understanding in language learning, where meaning is constructed in the classroom setting and the members of the class participate in that meaning. In a sense, understanding is seen as a social institution, like a bank owned by a social co-operative, from which contributors can borrow and to which they can contribute. Such a conceptualization often accompanies a view of language itself as a social institution, where again the bank analogy can fruitfully be drawn. This in turn often leads to an assumption that meaning is 'negotiated' between participants in an interaction, as it were 'out there' in a social space. Such an approach may be ascribed to de Saussure who wrote:

> If we could embrace the sum of word-images stored in the minds of all individuals, we could identify the social bond that constitutes language. It is a storehouse filled by the members of a given community through their active use of speaking, a grammatical system that has a potential existence in each brain, or, more specifically, in the brains of a group of individuals. For language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity.
> (de Saussure/Wade Baskin (trans.) 1960: 13)

De Saussure appreciated that, to include all that we know of language, it is necessary to adopt two distinct but complementary views. First, the view of language as a social institution, and second, the view of language as experienced by a single individual, which is necessarily limited by that individual's personal life-history. The first view is best represented in this

collection by Brumfit and by Milroy, but the view of language as a social institution is also discussed in the papers of G. Brown and Spolsky. The complementary second view, nowadays often called the 'cognitive' view, is at least implicitly adopted by most of the other contributors with respect to language and, significantly, with respect to the processes of understanding. The papers by Aitchison, G. Brown, Bialystok, Garnham, Short, and Wilson, are all concerned, in different ways, with how individuals understand and/or learn language. Although the focus of attention is quite different, once again it can be seen that there is no conflict between the two approaches. They should ideally be seen as complementary, concentrating on different aspects of experience.

Although many of us may pay lip-service to the 'complementarity' view of the social and cognitive approaches to the study of language, few applied linguists maintain an objective bipartisan stance to the issue and are equally devoted to both views. For a variety of historical and social reasons, applied linguistics as a discipline has tended towards an emphasis on language as a social institution. The discipline will be impoverished if it fails also to take account of research into the cognitive aspects of language learning and language understanding.

2.3   Diversities of understanding

As soon as we accept that communication is a risky undertaking, requiring not simply the exchange of linguistically packaged ideas, but an effort of imagination on the part of the reader or listener, we can see why it is that the same message can be interpreted by listeners in different ways. The issue of diversity in understanding is explicitly raised in most of the papers, and dealt with at length by both Brumfit and Spolsky. Spolsky points to the variability of interpretations of the 'same' text according to who is doing the interpreting — test writers, test takers, or examiners — and according to the number of times the text is read or heard. The question of 'what a text means' is crucial to language testing, and yet, as Spolsky remarks, since so many social and cognitive aspects are involved in comprehension, over and above decoding the familiar linguistic categories, it is hard to be sure what it is that a test is measuring.

It is hard enough to be sure what are the relevant processes when testing native speakers working in their own language. It is even more difficult if they are working in a foreign language. Bialystok argues that what is crucial here is *control* of the input, to ensure that it is compatible with the learner's mental representation of the language at each stage of the learning process. This requires that teachers be able to analyse the demands that different types of task make upon the learner. G. Brown in her paper suggests that one parameter which teachers would do well to consider in this context is

the different level of cognitive demands made by texts in different genres.

Once again, these diverse contributors appear to entertain compatible views on the issue of diversity of interpretation.

2.4   Language understood in context

Throughout these papers runs a common theme: that language is understood in context. Milroy and Brumfit are concerned with different aspects of the social, interactional context in which language is experienced. K. Brown discusses the way in which the choice of particular verbs sets up specific configurations of semantic roles which characterize prototypical contexts, which then bring other aspects of such contexts in their train. Thus, if the verb BUY is used to describe an action of John's, it creates the context of a 'commercial exchange' which makes available other roles such as a seller, the price paid, the money used in payment, the object bought, and so on. Garnham also appeals to immediate linguistic context to give an account of the interpretation of anaphoric expressions in brief texts. And in the earlier part of his paper, where he discusses the implications of connectionism for modelling language learning, he appeals to a theory of spreading activation which might offer some hope of modelling the effect of context. Short also considers context, in particular the effect of deictic expressions in focusing upon an action from different points of view. All of these writers help themselves to as much of a notion of context as they need, without feeling obliged to explicate in detail how they conceive of the notion, or whether or not there is a general theory of context into which their approach fits (and the assumption must be that there is not).

There is, of course, the notorious problem that 'context' is a notion which seems to be impossible to constrain. If someone speaks to you of Wordsworth and then goes on to speak of 'his cottage', is it reasonable to suppose that HIS COTTAGE was somehow activated in your mind simply by mentioning Wordsworth, along with HIS SISTER, HIS FINGER-NAILS, HIS ARMCHAIR, and, literally, innumerable other features which might reasonably be associated with him? Most people would agree that it is not reasonable. But just what is activated immediately in your mind when the name 'Wordsworth' is mentioned? And how does that mention contribute to the creation of a context, and just what is 'in' that context? The only paper to address some of these problems of context directly is that of Wilson, who suggests that the listener activates no more context than is necessary to understand the utterance and that, rather than taking account of external features of context before and during the utterance, the listener only activates the necessary amount of context after having heard the utterance. The theory propounded in this paper has raised great interest because of the bold nature of the claims that it makes about cognitive processing, and it has generated animated discussion in a variety of fields

(see, for instance, *Brain and Behavioural Science 10*: 697–749, which is devoted to reviews of Sperber and Wilson 1986).

Of all the areas we have discussed, that of understanding language in context is the one which may be seen as at once the most crucial to language teaching and the most controversial. In general, the other views put forward in this collection of papers, although diverse in their origins, can be seen as remarkably compatible with each other, complementary rather than in conflict.