
Introducing
**APPLIED
LINGUISTICS**

S. PIT CORDER



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PELICAN BOOKS

INTRODUCING APPLIED LINGUISTICS

S. Pit Corder was Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh.

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Preface

My purpose in writing this book has been to show the relevance of those studies which are broadly called linguistic to a number of practical tasks connected with language teaching. There will certainly be some readers who, while not disputing the relevance of linguistic studies to language teaching, will nevertheless criticize my implied restriction of the term 'applied linguistics' to this field of activity, on the grounds that there are practical tasks other than language teaching to which a knowledge of linguistics is relevant. I do not disagree with them in principle, but claim nevertheless that, because of the greater public interest in language teaching and the considerable official support there has been in recent years for research and teaching in the application of linguistics to language teaching, this term has effectively come to be restricted in this way in common usage.

Although this book is intended primarily for practising language teachers and those preparing to become language teachers, it is my hope that it may also be of interest not only to the general reader but also to linguists who wish to know something of the way in which their investigations, methods and discoveries may be put to use by one group of professionals for whom language plays a central part in their activities. I am enough of a purist to believe that 'applied linguistics' presupposes 'linguistics'; that one cannot apply what one does not possess. Consequently, for the reader who already has a knowledge of linguistics the first two sections of the book will contain largely familiar material, although the relative emphasis I have placed upon the different branches of linguistic study reflect the importance they have for language teaching rather than the degree of theoretical adequacy they have attained. For those who have no training in linguistics, these sections are intended to provide an overview or 'shop window' of what linguistics is about, as seen through the eyes of the applied linguist,

rather than a formal introduction to the subject. If the presentation I have made stirs their interest, there are now a number of excellent introductions to the subject to which they may turn, some of which figure in the bibliography.

A bibliography is like an anthology; it is a personal reaction to a body of literature. The necessarily broad range of topics which have had to be touched on in this introductory book has posed problems of selection. My guiding principle has been to refer only to those books and articles which in my opinion offer some particular insights into language, its use and how it is learned which are relevant to language teaching. In no sense can the bibliography be regarded as a comprehensive coverage of work either in linguistics or applied linguistics.

This book owes much to discussions over the years not only with my colleagues and students but with many other applied linguists in Britain and overseas. Through these discussions, the model of applied linguistics presented here has developed. More especially I am indebted to those colleagues who have kindly read parts of the book and offered their comments and criticisms: David Crystal, Patrick Allen, Gill and Keith Brown, Clive Criper, Alan Davies, Tony Howatt, Elizabeth Ingram and Henry Widdowson. Whilst they have saved me from a number of inaccuracies and infelicities, they can in no way be held responsible for the opinions which are expressed and the many imperfections and shortcomings which no doubt remain.

Finally, I must express my thanks to my wife for typing the first draft of the book. My admiration for her skill in deciphering my handwriting is equalled only by my gratitude for the patience and understanding she has shown through the whole period during which the book was being written.

Introduction

Language teaching: art and science

People often say that language teaching is an art. If all they mean when they say this is that it is a highly skilled activity which is learned by careful observation and patient practice, then it is a harmless platitude. But what often lies behind the assertion is that science and art are mutually exclusive and that therefore science can play no part in language teaching. We call a particular practical activity an art when it cannot be carried out successfully by following a set of rules of thumb, when our knowledge of all the factors involved is incomplete and when, consequently, many of the decisions on how to proceed must be left to the private knowledge and experience of the practitioner. Language teaching is an activity of this sort. It involves many different considerations or, in technical language, *variables*, the relative importance, or *value* of which, even if we were aware of them all, cannot yet readily be assessed, or *quantified*. For this reason the activity of language teaching cannot be simulated on a computer, i.e. modelled mathematically, or reduced to a systematic set of logically related procedures, or an *algorithm*. But because not all of the variables are known, quantifiable and controllable, it does not mean that none of them are. There are, for example, all those factors which must be taken into account in any teaching task: the aptitude and personality of the pupils, their intellectual capacities, their attitude or motivation towards learning. These are all matters which have been investigated by educational psychologists and some aspects of them at least are now describable, measurable and controllable.

But there is a considerable body of knowledge available about the nature of human language, about how it is learned and what part it plays in the life of the individual and the community. These are mat-

ters of scientific investigation by those who study human language, the linguists, and must have a bearing on some of the questions which arise in the planning and execution of a language-teaching programme. Linguistics provides a growing body of scientific knowledge about language which can guide the activity of the language teacher. How this knowledge can be turned to good effect is the topic of this book.

Applied linguistics and language teaching

This is not another book on language teaching, still less an instructional manual on how to teach languages. There are plenty of books on this subject, reliable, unreliable and positively misleading. This one is about the contribution that the discoveries and methods of those who study language scientifically, that is, the linguist, the psycholinguist and the sociolinguist (to mention only the most important groups), can make to the solution of some of the problems which arise in the course of planning, organizing and carrying out a language-teaching programme. It is a book about applied linguistics.

Theories about the nature of human language are, of course, of use to other people besides the language teacher. It would be a mistake to associate applied linguistics exclusively with language teaching. There are other people who are engaged in practical activities which involve language in a central role for whom a knowledge of its nature could be of use in dealing with problems which arise in their work: the speech therapist, the literary critic, the communications engineer, for example. We do not uniquely associate applied linguistics with any single one of these activities. Whilst applied linguistics and language teaching may be closely associated, they are not one and the same activity.

The application of linguistic knowledge to some object – or applied linguistics, as its name implies – is an activity. It is not a theoretical study. It makes use of the findings of theoretical studies. The applied linguist is a consumer, or user, not a producer, of theories. If we use the term ‘theory’ as it is used in science, then there is no such thing as a ‘theory of language teaching’ or a ‘theory of speech therapy’ or a ‘theory of literary criticism’. Language teaching is also an activity, but teaching languages is not the same activity as applied linguistics. However, if we interpret language teaching in the very broadest sense, to include all the planning and decision-making which takes place outside

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the classroom, then there may be an element of applied linguistics in all language teaching. Just as there may be an element of applied linguistics in all speech therapy or all literary criticism.

This, then, is a book about applied linguistics in language teaching; about those parts of the total language teaching operation in which decisions are made in the light of a knowledge of the nature of human language, how it is learned and its role in society. It deals with those parts of the operation which are potentially susceptible to some sort of systematization based upon scientifically acquired knowledge.

In spite of the many hundreds of years through which language has been studied in our civilization, we still know little about many of its aspects. The pace of investigation has quickened in recent years and the methods of investigation have increasingly been made more rigorous, to the point that we can now, with some justification and within certain defined boundaries, claim that linguistic studies are scientific. That is why I said that applied linguistics deals with that part of the language teaching operation which is potentially susceptible of some sort of rigorous systematization. We are still a long way from achieving such a systematization, as will become apparent in later chapters. For this reason linguistics can, as yet, scarcely claim to give firm answers to any but a few problems in language teaching. Applied linguistics as a field of study is scarcely twenty years old. The reader must judge for himself how much has been achieved in that time.

The language-teaching operation

I referred in the last section to the 'total language-teaching operation'. I did so because the simple term, *teaching*, is too vague in its meaning. In its popular use it refers most often to the activity of the teacher in the classroom in his interaction with his pupils. But teachers know that this represents only the end point of a time-consuming activity, planning, detailed preparation, correcting, assessing progress, all of which are an important, indeed, indispensable part of their work. What teachers do not always so readily recognize is that they, too, are dependent upon the work of others who also have a hand in, and, in some measure, determine, what goes on in the classroom. Teachers use textbooks, equipment, visual and other aids, they work to a syllabus and to a timetable, and often submit their pupils to examinations or tests

prepared by others. These materials and plans are frequently things that they have little or no part in, but which contribute to, or even control, to some extent, what goes on in the classroom. In the total teaching operation, then, I include all planning and decision-making at whatever level which bears directly or indirectly on what goes on in the classroom. If we take the task of the teacher to be that of creating the conditions in which learning can most advantageously take place, then all decisions which bear on that objective are part of the total teaching operation. Some of these decisions at least will be made in the light of our current understanding of the nature of language.

Decisions and plans are made at various levels. At the highest level the decisions are political and made by governments and ministries. Decisions at this level are of a very general nature: whether languages are to be taught; which languages are to be taught; and how much money is to be available for training and paying teachers. One might think that linguistics had no contribution to make at this level. This is certainly the case in most European countries, but in many multi-lingual states in Africa and Asia the decisions about which languages to teach and at what level in the educational system to teach them are difficult ones and are made, at least in part, on the basis of studies made by sociolinguists into the distribution and various functions of different languages in the community, and the role that these languages have in the political and commercial life of the community and in its contacts with the world outside. This is an area of linguistic studies sometimes known as *language planning*.

When such fundamentally political decisions have been made there is another aspect of planning and decision-making which is based on economic, administrative and social considerations within the country. For how long, for what purposes and to whom shall certain languages be taught? Decisions of this sort may be taken at a lower point in the administrative hierarchy, often regionally, and sometimes, depending upon the administrative structure of the educational system, in the school itself. And here again the sociolinguist has a part to play.

We can group together all these fundamental decisions concerned with determining the aims and providing the means of language learning as the apex of the hierarchical structure of the total language-teaching operation. The second level is concerned with the implementation of these decisions, in general with the problems of what to teach and how to organize it. This is what this book is about, since it is at this

level that the contribution of linguistics to language teaching is principally effective. Applied linguistics has to do with the devising of syllabuses and materials for carrying out the intentions of education authorities whether local or national. Syllabuses relate to specific languages to be taught to more or less specific groups of learners for more or less specific purposes within more or less specific limitations of time and money. Textbooks and teaching materials of all sorts are the concrete realizations of the syllabus plan.

The third level at which decisions are made about language teaching is that of the classroom. The linguistic contribution at this level is clearly psychological, and is concerned with how people learn second languages. But many other considerations play a part: general pedagogic principles concerned with motivation, attitudes, intelligence and personality. These are largely non-linguistic, and are just as important in the teaching of other subjects as in the teaching of languages. Those who plan at the second level do not have the detailed information available to the classroom teacher, and can only take account of these variables in the most general way. One does not meet syllabuses or teaching materials specifically devised for intelligent but uninterested twelve year olds!

The devising of syllabuses and the preparation of materials and textbooks for language teaching has traditionally been carried out by experienced teachers and this is still largely so. But increasingly nowadays, as in other fields of curriculum development, this is being done as a cooperative effort, in which experienced teachers work together with specialists in the subject matter (often themselves trained teachers). The specialists in this case are what I am calling applied linguists.

We can summarize the contents of the last two sections in the following Table:

Table 1 Hierarchy of planning functions in the total language-teaching operation

Level 1	Political	Government	Whether, what language, whom to teach
Level 2	Linguistic, Sociolinguistic	Applied linguist	What to teach, when to teach, how much to teach
Level 3	Psycholinguistic, Pedagogic	Classroom teacher	How to teach

Success in language teaching

The applied linguist is a contributor to the whole language-teaching operation. He does not control it, nor does the classroom teacher, nor, for that matter, does the headmaster or the Minister of Education. It is a cooperative venture. The better each contributor's understanding of the principles upon which decisions are made at all levels, the better chances the whole operation has of being successful. But we must expect that all along the line compromises will have to be made. For example, psycholinguistic knowledge might suggest that there is some optimum age for beginning the study of foreign languages. Political and economic considerations might indicate that it was undesirable on a cost-benefit analysis to devote the necessary funds to providing qualified teachers at that level. The two principles would be in conflict. The final plan would represent a compromise. All the contributors to a total teaching operation are involved in its success: society, as represented by the education authorities, the applied linguist and the classroom teacher. But, as in all educational operations, the difficulty is to define what is meant by success. Society might define it in terms of social integration, commercial pay-off, or some concept of the 'educated man'; the teacher might define it in terms of academic achievement, or the 'fulfilment of the individual'; the applied linguist in terms of the attainment of some measurable performance skills in the language. But it is individuals who learn language and they do so for many different reasons: because they enjoy it, because it is useful in their academic advancement or in their future careers, or because it opens for them opportunities for social and cultural contact and enrichment. They do not all necessarily seek, or need, the same level of performance ability or even the same set of linguistic skills. What is success for one may be failure for another. The individual learner is very much concerned with success in his own terms.

For any measurement of success one needs a yardstick or a measuring instrument. No one has proposed as yet a means of measuring success in language learning in society's terms – cultural, social or commercial. But to the extent that the teacher's, the learner's and the applied linguist's aims can be specified in linguistic terms as the attainment of specific skills and knowledge, a way of measuring these can be devised. What we can describe we can, in general, measure. Linguistics

gives us a framework for describing what we mean by skill in, and knowledge of, a language and consequently makes it possible in principle to show that one way of teaching or one set of teaching materials is more effective than another for achieving a particular aim with a particular group of learners. There can be no systematic improvement in language teaching without reference to the knowledge about language which linguistics gives us.

