Teaching Language as Communication

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Introduction

This book is an attempt to clarify certain issues that seem to me to arise from adopting a communicative approach to the teaching of language. I have in mind, in particular, the teaching of English to speakers of other languages. Over recent years I (and a number of others) have advocated such an approach in principle and have tried to put it into practice in the preparation of teaching materials. In principle and practice, however, there always seemed to be loose ends of one sort or another: inconsistencies, unexamined assumptions, unresolved difficulties. My aim in this book was to sort out some of the things that I had been saying, consider their implications more closely, and see if they might be ordered into a coherent account. I wanted to try to think things through.

The 'communicative' approach is, of course, very much in vogue at present. As with all matters of fashion, the problem is that popular approbation tends to conceal the need for critical examination. There seems to be an assumption in some quarters, for example, that language is automatically taught as communication by the simple expedient of concentrating on 'notions' or 'functions' rather than on sentences. But people do not communicate by expressing isolated notions or fulfilling isolated functions any more than they do so by uttering isolated sentence patterns. We do not progress very far in our pedagogy by simply replacing abstract isolates of a linguistic kind by those of a cognitive or behavioural kind. If we are seriously interested in an approach to language teaching which will develop the ability to communicate, then we must accept the commitment to investigate the whole complex business of communication and the practical consequences of adopting it as a teaching aim. Such a commitment involves, I believe, a consideration of the nature of discourse and of the abilities that are engaged in creating it. This is the main concern of the first part of this book. The commitment involves, too, an attempt to think out the possible pedagogic procedures which will lead the learner towards the ability to handle discourse. The second part of the book represents such an attempt. I do not claim that in either part I have done any more than open up a number of possibilities. Our present state of knowledge about

language and language learning is such that it would be irresponsible to be anything but tentative. But it would be even more irresponsible to avoid investigation and to pretend that there are no problems.

So this book is not in any way intended as propaganda for a new 'communicative' orthodoxy in language teaching. It is, on the contrary, an appeal for critical investigation into the bases of a belief and its practical implications. I am not trying to present a conclusive case but to start an inquiry.

There are, it seems to me, two ways of looking at publication. The first, which one might dub the classical view, regards appearance in print as the final public revelation of carefully rehearsed ideas made as definitive and as precise as possible. The aim is for universality and permanence and one proceeds towards publication with cautious circumspection. This classical view is the one expressed by Alexander Pope in his curt recommendation to other, and lesser, poets: 'Keep your piece nine years!' The other view, the romantic, is less concerned with completeness, is much less cautious and circumspect, and regards publication, more cavalierly perhaps, as a device for public speculation. The aim here is to stimulate interest by exposure, to suggest rather than to specify, to allow the public access to personal thinking. It is this second view that I subscribe to in publishing this book. I accept, therefore, that its contents are transitional and transient. They are meant as a personal consideration of issues that seem to me to stand in need of examination at the moment.

When I say that this book is personal, I do not want to imply that I have produced it in isolation from the ideas of others. Quite the reverse. Over the past eight years I have had the benefit of continuing discussions with the staff and students in the Department of Linguistics at Edinburgh and most of what is worthwhile in this book derives directly or indirectly from them. Now, as I am about to leave Edinburgh for London, I should like to express my sense of personal and professional debt to that department. I must make particular mention of Patrick Allen with whom I have worked in developing the *English in Focus* series, which has been, and continues to be, an attempt to produce practical teaching materials in accordance with the kind of approach I explore here. The authors of particular titles in the series—Eric Glendinning, Elizabeth Laird, Joan Maclean, Alan Mountford and Ian Pearson—have all made valuable contributions to this development and have given me ideas that I would not have thought of on my own. Other people whose influence I would particularly like to acknowledge are Tony Howatt, who was kind enough to read through an earlier draft of the book and made many valuable suggestions for improvement, Guy Aston, Christopher Candlin, Malcolm Coulthard, John Sinclair, Hugh Trappes-Lomax, Sandy Urquhart and David Wilkins. None of

these people will agree with everything I say, of course; some might be quite appalled at the effect of their influence; all of them would very likely have made a better job of various parts of this book.

A different kind of influence altogether has been that of my wife. It is equally important, although I do not acknowledge it openly as often as I ought.

H. G. Widdowson
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March 1977

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1 Usage and use

1.1 Correctness and appropriacy

The aims of a language teaching course are very often defined with reference to the four 'language skills': understanding speech, speaking, reading and writing. These aims, therefore, relate to the kind of activity which the learners are to perform. But how can we characterize this activity? What is it that learners are expected to understand, speak, read and write? The obvious answer is: the language they are learning. But what exactly do we mean by this? We might mean a selection of lexical items recorded in a dictionary combined with syntactic structures recorded in a grammar. In this view, the teaching of a language involves developing the ability to produce correct sentences. Many teachers would subscribe to this view and it has been productive of a good deal of impressive language teaching material. In some respects, however, it is unsatisfactory. We may readily acknowledge that the ability to produce sentences is a crucial one in the learning of a language. It is important to recognize, however, that it is not the only ability that learners need to acquire. Someone knowing a language knows more than how to understand, speak, read and write sentences. He also knows how sentences are used to communicative effect.

We may conveniently begin by considering an example of a correct English sentence:

The rain destroyed the crops.

Here we have a correct English sentence and we might wish to say that anybody speaking or writing such a sentence gives evidence of a good knowledge of the language. We would judge anybody producing the following sentences, on the other hand, to have an inadequate knowledge:

The rain is destroy the crops.
The rain destruct the crops.

But what would we say if someone produced our correct sentence in the following context?

(A approaches B, a stranger, in the street)
A: Could you tell me the way to the railway station, please?
B: The rain destroyed the crops.

The sentence remains correct, of course, but we might well hesitate to say that B had a good knowledge of English on this evidence. We would be inclined to say that he did not really know the language. It might be objected that nobody in his senses would ever seriously utter this sentence in response to the kind of question that A puts. But why not? The answer is that when we acquire a language we do not only learn how to compose and comprehend correct sentences as isolated linguistic units of random occurrence; we also learn how to use sentences appropriately to achieve a communicative purpose. We are not just walking grammars.

It might appear that the example I have given is somewhat extreme. Let us consider another:

A: What did the rain do?
B: The crops were destroyed by the rain.

This is a distinct improvement on the previous exchange, but as competent speakers of English we can recognize, nevertheless, that B's reply is still in some way the wrong kind of reply. It does not take on an appropriate form in this context. By the same token we recognize that the following are odd combinations of sentences:

A: What was destroyed by the rain?
B: The rain destroyed the crops.

A: What happened to the crops?
B: The rain destroyed the crops.

We also recognize that the following exchanges are quite normal:

A: What did the rain do?
B: It destroyed the crops.

A: What was destroyed by the rain?
B: The crops.

A: What happened to the crops?
B: They were destroyed by the rain.

Making an appropriate reply is a matter of selecting a sentence which will combine with the sentence used for asking the question. Or it may involve using only part of a sentence, as in the second of the normal exchanges given above.

1.2 Usage and use as aspects of performance

The learning of a language, then, involves acquiring the ability to compose correct sentences. That is one aspect of the matter. But it also

involves acquiring an understanding of which sentences, or parts of sentences are appropriate in a particular context. The first kind of ability depends upon a knowledge of the grammatical rules of the language being learned. We can demonstrate this knowledge by producing strings of sentences without regard to context:

The rain destroyed the crops.
The cat sat on the mat.
The unicorn is a mythical beast.
Poor John ran away.
The farmer killed the duckling.
John loves Mary.
My tailor is rich.

To produce sentences like this is to manifest our knowledge of the language system of English. We will say that they are instances of correct English *usage*. But of course we are not commonly called upon simply to manifest our knowledge in this way in the normal circumstances of daily life. We are generally required to use our knowledge of the language system in order to achieve some kind of communicative purpose. That is to say, we are generally called upon to produce instances of language *use*: we do not simply manifest the abstract system of the language, we at the same time realize it as meaningful communicative behaviour.

This distinction between usage and use is related to de Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* and Chomsky's similar distinction between competence and performance.[1] It is important to make clear what this distinction is. The notion of competence has to do with a language user's knowledge of abstract linguistic rules. This knowledge has to be put into effect as behaviour, it has to be revealed through performance. When it is put into effect through the citation of sentences to illustrate these rules, as is done in grammar books, then performance yields instances of usage: abstract knowledge is manifested. When language teachers select structures and vocabulary for their courses they select those items of usage which they judge to be most effective for teaching the underlying rules of the language system. Usage, then, is one aspect of performance, that aspect which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules. Use is another aspect of performance: that which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication.

In normal circumstances, linguistic performance involves the simultaneous manifestation of the language system as usage and its realization as use. But we can separate one from the other if we wish by focusing our attention on one rather than the other. When we are engaged in conversation we do not as a rule take note of such usage phenomena as

grammatical irregularities (which may be quite frequent) in the speech of the person we are talking to, unless they force themselves on our attention by impeding communication. Our concern is with use and this concern filters out such irregularities of usage. If we assume the role of linguists in search of data, on the other hand, we might well adjust our focus of attention and concentrate on our interlocutor's usage, take note of his hesitations and repetitions, the peculiarites of his pronunciation and so on. The terms we have in English for referring to performance reflect these two aspects of behaviour. An expression like 'She speaks indistinctly', for example, refers to usage and an expression like 'He speaks persuasively' refers to use. I shall return to the relevance of the usage/use distinction to a definition of the so-called 'language skills' in Chapter 3.

Although there is a natural coincidence of usage and use in normal language behaviour, these two aspects of performance tend to be treated separately by people concerned with the description and the teaching of languages. Thus the grammarian illustrates the abstract rules of the system of the language he is describing by devising sentences in isolation which manifest these rules. The language teacher designing materials has also generally been inclined to concentrate on usage: the common practice is to select and organize language items with a view to demonstrating how the rules of the system can be manifested through sentences. There has been less concern with demonstrating how such rules can be realized for communicative purposes as use. So when the teacher introduces a sentence like:

A book is on the table.

he does so to manifest the operation of a set of rules for sentence formation. He is not offering it as an example of a meaningful act of communication. In fact, utterances of sentences of this kind are of relatively rare occurrence as instances of use.

1.3 Usage and use in classroom presentation

I want now to consider some examples of how language is presented in the classroom and how this presentation, in concentrating on usage, may sometimes involve an inappropriate use of language. The following is an example of a familiar oral drill in which the learner is required to repeat a sentence pattern by using different 'call-words'

Teacher: Book
Pupils: There is a book on the table.
Teacher: Bag.
Pupils: There is a bag on the table.

Teacher: Pen.
Pupils: There is a pen on the table.
Teacher: Under the table.
Pupils: There is a pen under the table.
Teacher: On the floor.
Pupils: There is a pen on the floor.

What is going on here? We have a series of responses to a verbal cue but these responses are not replies in any normal sense. The pupils are demonstrating their knowledge of usage by manipulating the sentence pattern but they are not doing so for any other purpose.

Let us now adjust the drill so that we get what appears to be a more normal question and answer sequence:

Teacher: What is on the table?
Pupils: There is a book on the table.
Teacher: What is on the floor?
Pupils: There is a bag on the floor.
Teacher: Where is the bag?
Pupils: The bag is on the floor.
Teacher: Where is the book?
Pupils: The book is on the table.

Here we can recognize that some account is taken of use. To begin with, for the pupils to give an answer there must be a book on the table and a bag on the floor: there must be some simple situation to refer to. The pupils are not simply spinning sentences out without any reference to what the words mean, as they are in the first drill. But although there is some concern for use in this respect, it is still usage which has the dominant emphasis. Although the pupils' response is a reply to a question and not just a reaction to a prompt, the *form* of the reply is inappropriate. We can compare the drill with the following exchanges where the replies take on a more normal appearance:

A: What is on the table?
B: A book.
A: Where is the bag?
B: On the floor.

Even in this form, however, the language cannot necessarily be regarded as demonstrating appropriate use. To see why this is so, we have to ask ourselves: 'Why does A ask this question?' If a book is seen to be on the table, and a bag seen to be on the floor, and if everybody is aware of the location of these objects, then why does A need to ask where they are? If there is a book on the table in front of the whole class, then, as has been pointed out, the question is contextualised to the extent that it refers to something outside language and is not just a manipulation of

the language itself. But by the same token, the fact that there *is* a book on the table, visible to everybody, makes it extremely unnatural to ask if it is there. Thus the provision of a situation may lead away from usage in one respect but lead back to usage in another. Only if the pupils know that the teacher cannot see the bag and is genuinely looking for it does his question as to its whereabouts take on the character of natural use. The following classroom exchange, for example, would commonly take on this genuine quality of real communication:

Teacher: Where's the duster?
Pupils: Under your chair.

We may say that the realization of language as use involves two kinds of ability. One kind is the ability to select which form of sentence is appropriate for a particular *linguistic context*. The second is the ability to recognize which function is fulfilled by a sentence in a particular *communicative situation*. Let us look again at our examples.

Teacher: What is on the table?
Pupils: There is a book on the table.

If this is part of a drill and there is a book on the table which everybody can see, then the teacher's question is not fulfilling a normal function since in ordinary circumstances we do not ask questions about something we already know. So the teacher's question and the pupils' answer do not fulfil a communicative function in this particular situation. Furthermore, a question of this form does not normally require a response which takes the form of sentence which the pupils give, so their reply is not appropriate in this particular linguistic context. This exchange, then, illustrates both inappropriate function in relation to the situation and inappropriate form in relation to the context. Let us now consider a second example:

Teacher: What is on the table?
Pupils: A book.

In this case, we have a reply which is appropriate with regard to form. But the function of the question and answer sequence remains as unnatural as before: the situation is still the same and still makes the question and answer inappropriate. This becomes clear if we compare this last example with what can be taken as an instance of genuine language use like the following:

Teacher: Where's the duster?
Pupils: Under your chair.

or:

Teacher: Where's Mary today?
Pupils: She's not well.

Here, it is appropriate for the teacher to ask a question and for the pupils to answer him: the situation is that he doesn't know where his duster is, and he doesn't know where Mary is, and he supposes that his pupils might know. Furthermore, the pupils' reply takes on an appropriate form in each exchange.

We have considered the case where sentences may have the appropriate form in the context in which they appear but which nevertheless do not function appropriately in the situation. We can also have sentences which function appropriately but whose form does not seem to be entirely appropriate. Consider the following:

Teacher: Where's the duster?
Pupils: The duster is under your chair.
Teacher: Where's Mary today?
Pupils: Mary is not well today.

I should make it clear that it is not my intention to question the usefulness of drills of the kind that we have been discussing but only to point out what they are useful for. They can teach that aspect of use which has to do with appropriate contextual form. But in normal language behaviour this is inseparably bound up with that aspect of use involving situational function, which these drills commonly are not designed to accommodate.

Let us now consider other classroom procedures in the light of the usage/use distinction that has been made. One of them which might appear to introduce use is what is generally referred to as 'situational presentation'. This involves the teacher demonstrating meaning by reference to objects or events actually present or enacted in the classroom. These objects and events are said to represent the situation. Thus, for example, the teacher in the early stages of an English course might hold up a pen, point to it and say:

This is a pen.

Here we have a correct English sentence. It is an instance of correct usage. But is it also an instance of appropriate use? It is true that the sentence makes reference to something in the situation devised by the teacher. But the situation that he has devised is not one which would normally require him to make use of such a sentence. The pupils know what a pen is as an object. What they do not know is what this object is called in English. The sentence which the teacher produces is of the kind which would be appropriate if it were necessary to identify an object: his sentence would normally function as an identification. But the learners do not need to have the object *identified* as a pen, they need to have it *named* as 'a pen' (as opposed to 'une plume', 'ein Feder', or whatever other term is used in their own language). So the form

sentence which is needed if use is to be demonstrated is really something like:

The English word for this is 'pen'.

or:

This is called 'a pen' in English.

Notice that this does not mean that the structure exemplified by a sentence like 'This is a pen' cannot take on an appropriate communicative function in another situation. Imagine, for example, a chemistry laboratory. The teacher is showing his pupils a flask of liquid and for the purposes of the experiment he is about to carry out he needs to identify what it is. In this situation he can quite appropriately say:

This is sulphuric acid.

Here he is not just demonstrating a structure, he is using the language for a required communicative purpose.

Similarly, if the teacher has been talking about, say, barometers and then wants to make sure that his class knows what a barometer actually looks like before going on to demonstrate how it works, then he can present the instrument for their inspection and quite appropriately say:

This is a barometer.

In these cases, the sentence pattern we are considering takes on a natural function in the situation. It is not simply an instance of correct usage; it is also an instance of appropriate use.

Let us consider another example. One of the most widespread ways of demonstrating the present continuous tense by 'situational presentation' is for the teacher to perform an activity like walking to the door or the window and to say, while doing so,

I am walking to the door.
I am walking to the window.

Now although the teacher has thereby devised a situation which makes the meaning of his sentence plain, the situation at the same time makes his sentence inappropriate in terms of use. Since everybody sees him walking to the door and walking to the window there is no need whatever for him to announce that he is doing these things. The situation would not normally call for such a comment. If my wife, for example, leaves the room during a dinner party she does not say:

I am walking to the door.

What she *may* say is something like:

I am going to the kitchen to see if the dinner's ready.

But she will only say this if she thinks that some explanation is called for. Otherwise she will say nothing at all, or perhaps some thing like:

Excuse me for a moment. I must go to the kitchen.

and everybody will realize that she has to go to the kitchen to attend to the dinner.

One can, however, think of other situations in which an utterance of a sentence of the form we are considering would be appropriate as an instance of use. Imagine, for example, the situation in which one person is in a telephone box describing the movements of somebody else to a third person at the other end of the line. This kind of situation occurs fairly frequently in detective films. The person on the telephone might in this situation produce sentences like the following:

The suspect is crossing the road. He is talking to the newspaper seller on the corner.

In this case, these sentences are being used to provide a commentary for somebody who is not present at the scene. Similarly, we can think of the situation in which a bomb-disposal expert is giving a commentary on his actions as he dismantles an explosive device:

I am turning the red switch on the left of the dial. I am now disconnecting the right hand wire.

Here we have sentences used appropriately because people who cannot see what is going on (they have retired to a safe distance) need to know what the expert is doing. If he fails and the bomb explodes, the next expert will have some idea how to avoid the same fate.

The point that is being made here in citing these examples is that a sentence pattern of the kind exemplified by:

I am walking to the door.
He is walking to the door.
etc.

can function appropriately as an instance of use if the situation is such that in producing such a sentence the speaker is at the same time performing an act of communication, like explaining something or giving a commentary. In the case of an explanation, the speaker makes clear what he or she is doing, or what somebody else is doing, on the assumption that this is not self evident. In the case of a commentary, the speaker tells somebody else who is not present at the scene what is going on. These can be said to represent certain contextual conditions which determine that sentences of the form in question count as actual instances of use and not simply instances of usage. But in the case of the teacher saying a sentence of this kind while actually performing the activity