

Oxford **Introductions** to Language Study

Series Editor H.G. Widdowson

Applied Linguistics

Guy Cook

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Applied Linguistics

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Preface

Purpose

What justification might there be for a series of introductions to language study? After all, linguistics is already well served with introductory texts: expositions and explanations which are comprehensive, authoritative, and excellent in their way. Generally speaking, however, their way is the essentially academic one of providing a detailed initiation into the discipline of linguistics, and they tend to be lengthy and technical: appropriately so, given their purpose. But they can be quite daunting to the novice. There is also a need for a more general and gradual introduction to language: transitional texts which will ease people into an understanding of complex ideas. This series of introductions is designed to serve this need.

Their purpose, therefore, is not to supplant but to support the more academically oriented introductions to linguistics: to prepare the conceptual ground. They are based on the belief that it is an advantage to have a broad map of the terrain sketched out before one considers its more specific features on a smaller scale, a general context in reference to which the detail makes sense. It is sometimes the case that students are introduced to detail without it being made clear what it is a detail *of*. Clearly, a general understanding of ideas is not sufficient: there needs to be closer scrutiny. But equally, close scrutiny can be myopic and meaningless unless it is related to the larger view. Indeed, it can be said that the precondition of more particular enquiry is an awareness of what, in general, the particulars are about. This series is designed to provide this large-scale view of different areas of language study.

As such it can serve as a preliminary to (and precondition for) the more specific and specialized enquiry which students of linguistics are required to undertake.

But the series is not only intended to be helpful to such students. There are many people who take an interest in language without being academically engaged in linguistics *per se*. Such people may recognize the importance of understanding language for their own lines of enquiry, or for their own practical purposes, or quite simply for making them aware of something which figures so centrally in their everyday lives. If linguistics has revealing and relevant things to say about language, this should presumably not be a privileged revelation, but one accessible to people other than linguists. These books have been so designed as to accommodate these broader interests too: they are meant to be introductions to language more generally as well as to linguistics as a discipline.

Design

The books in the series are all cut to the same basic pattern. There are four parts: Survey, Readings, References, and Glossary.

Survey

This is a summary overview of the main features of the area of language study concerned: its scope and principles of enquiry, its basic concerns and key concepts. These are expressed and explained in ways which are intended to make them as accessible as possible to people who have no prior knowledge or expertise in the subject. The Survey is written to be readable and is uncluttered by the customary scholarly references. In this sense, it is simple. But it is not simplistic. Lack of specialist expertise does not imply an inability to understand or evaluate ideas. Ignorance means lack of knowledge, not lack of intelligence. The Survey, therefore, is meant to be challenging. It draws a map of the subject area in such a way as to stimulate thought and to invite a critical participation in the exploration of ideas. This kind of conceptual cartography has its dangers of course: the selection of what is significant, and the manner of its representation, will not be to the liking of everybody, particularly not, perhaps, to some of those inside the discipline. But these surveys are written in the belief that there

must be an alternative to a technical account on the one hand and an idiot's guide on the other if linguistics is to be made relevant to people in the wider world.

Readings

Some people will be content to read, and perhaps re-read, the summary Survey. Others will want to pursue the subject and so will use the Survey as the preliminary for more detailed study. The Readings provide the necessary transition. For here the reader is presented with texts extracted from the specialist literature. The purpose of these Readings is quite different from the Survey. It is to get readers to focus on the specifics of what is said, and how it is said, in these source texts. Questions are provided to further this purpose: they are designed to direct attention to points in each text, how they compare across texts, and how they deal with the issues discussed in the Survey. The idea is to give readers an initial familiarity with the more specialist idiom of the linguistics literature, where the issues might not be so readily accessible, and to encourage them into close critical reading.

References

One way of moving into more detailed study is through the Readings. Another is through the annotated References in the third section of each book. Here there is a selection of works (books and articles) for further reading. Accompanying comments indicate how these deal in more detail with the issues discussed in the different chapters of the Survey.

Glossary

Certain terms in the Survey appear in bold. These are terms used in a special or technical sense in the discipline. Their meanings are made clear in the discussion, but they are also explained in the Glossary at the end of each book. The Glossary is cross-referenced to the Survey, and therefore serves at the same time as an index. This enables readers to locate the term and what it signifies in the more general discussion, thereby, in effect, using the Survey as a summary work of reference.

Use

The series has been designed so as to be flexible in use. Each title is separate and self-contained, with only the basic format in common. The four sections of the format, as described here, can be drawn upon and combined in different ways, as required by the needs, or interests, of different readers. Some may be content with the Survey and the Glossary and may not want to follow up the suggested References. Some may not wish to venture into the Readings. Again, the Survey might be considered as appropriate preliminary reading for a course in applied linguistics or teacher education, and the Readings more appropriate for seminar discussion during the course. In short, the notion of an introduction will mean different things to different people, but in all cases the concern is to provide access to specialist knowledge and stimulate an awareness of its significance. This series as a whole has been designed to provide this access and promote this awareness in respect to different areas of language study.

H.G. WIDDOWSON

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Though short, this book has been through many drafts. It proved, to my surprise, far more exacting to write than a longer book—and in the middle I nearly gave up. There are a number of people whose help and friendship has kept me going. Thanks are due to Cristina Whitecross at OUP for her efficiency and encouragement, Kieran O'Halloran, Alison Sealey, and Tony Smith for enlightening discussion and advice, Elena Poptsova Cook for support and inspiration. I also thank Anne Conybeare for improving the manuscript in its final stages. But most of all, my greatest thanks go to the series editor, Henry Widdowson, for pursuing every point in every draft so critically but so constructively.

GUY COOK

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SECTION I

Survey

1

Applied linguistics

The need for applied linguistics

Language is at the heart of human life. Without it, many of our most important activities are inconceivable. Try to imagine relating to your family, making friends, learning, falling in love, forming a relationship, being a parent, holding—or rejecting—a religious faith, having political ideals, or taking political action, without using words. There are other important activities, of course, which do seem to exist without language. Sexual relations, preparing and eating food, manual labour and crafts, the visual arts, playing and listening to music, wondering at the natural world, or grieving at its destruction. Yet even these are often developed or enhanced through language. We would perceive them quite differently had we never read about them or discussed them.

Throughout history and across the world, people have used language to gossip and chat, flirt and seduce, play games, sing songs, tell stories, teach children, worship gods, insult enemies, pass on information, make deals, remember the past, and lament the dead. Such activities seem to be intrinsic to human life, as natural to us as flight is to birds. People do them without conscious analysis. It does not seem that we need to know about language to use it effectively.

Language use, then, is in many ways a natural phenomenon beyond conscious control. Yet there are also aspects of language use in which we can intervene and about which, consequently, there are decisions to be made. In making these decisions there

are many questions and subsidiary questions to be asked, each one admitting many different and opposed answers. Take, for example, language in education.

- What language skills should children attain beyond basic literacy? (And what is basic literacy anyway? Reading and writing, or something more?)
- Should children speaking a dialect be encouraged to maintain it or steered towards the **standard** form of a language? (And, if so, how is that standard form decided and by whom?)
- In communities with more than one language which ones should be used in schools? (And does every child have a right to be educated in the language they use at home?)
- Should deaf children learn a sign language, or a combination of lip reading and speaking? (And are sign languages as complex as spoken ones?)
- Should everyone learn foreign languages and, if so, which one or ones? (And what is the best way to learn and teach them?)
- Should every child study literature? (And, if so, should it be established works or more modern ones? And should they study just their own national literature or that of other countries?)

Such language issues, however, are by no means confined to the school. On the contrary, these educational dilemmas echo those of society at large.

- Languages change. Should this just be accepted as an inevitable fact or should change be controlled in some way?
- Some languages are dying out. Should that be prevented and, if so, how?
- Should the growth of English as the international **lingua franca** be welcomed or deplored?
- Is it better for people to learn each other's languages or use translations? (And what is accurate or 'good' translation? Could it ever be done by computer?)
- Is language being used for political oppression and indoctrination? (And, if so, should something be done about it?)
- Which languages should be used in law courts and official documents?

All of these questions, and many more like them, demand

answers. In the contemporary world, with its rapid and radical changes, many of them take on a new significance and seem more pressing than they have in the past. To answer them it seems reasonable that we should set out to investigate and understand the facts of language use, to organize and formalize what we know, and to subject our knowledge to rational consideration and critical analysis. Only by doing so will we be able to set out the options for action and the reasoning behind them, and to debate the alternatives openly and independently, in as informed and rational a manner as possible. This is the aim—and the aspiration—of **applied linguistics**, the academic discipline concerned with the relation of knowledge about language to decision making in the real world.

Examples and procedures

On the basis of this definition, then, we can say that applied linguistics sets out to investigate problems in the world in which language is implicated—both educational and social problems like those listed above. Our provisional definition is, of course, very abstract and general, so we might give it some substance by considering a few concrete examples. In what kind of problems is language implicated? How might they be investigated?

Here are a number of imaginary but representative situations in which decisions about language need to be taken.

- The head teacher of a London school is thinking of offering another foreign language in addition to French. The options are Chinese (the world's largest first language), Spanish (one of the world's largest and most widely distributed languages), or the Indian language Gujarati (the largest second language in the school and local community, and one which has approximately forty-three million speakers worldwide). Which of these languages should be taught, and why?
- A business executive wants to learn Japanese in preparation for taking up a post in Tokyo. There are three courses available. Course One has a strong emphasis on learning to write. Course Two focuses on the spoken language, claiming that learning to write too early is demotivating. It does, however, explain the rules of Japanese grammar in English and

use translation. Course Three's approach is 'natural', with no translation or explanation of rules, but only a series of communicative classroom activities and tasks. Which course is the best choice, and why?

- A business in the USA exports industrial machinery to South America. There are frequently financial, legal, and safety documents to translate, and it is important that these are accurate. The firm employs two translators: Juan, a sixty-year-old Cuban émigré who once ran a similar business, and twenty-two-year-old Jemima, who studied Spanish literature at a prestigious university. Juan complains to the management that Jemima's translation of some safety regulations is full of errors. Jemima says this is nonsense, and there is a terrible row. None of the managers speak Spanish themselves. How can they judge between them?
- Zramzshra is a small (fictional) island in the Indian Ocean. The Zramzsharan language uses a unique alphabet which developed from the Phoenician alphabet when traders came to the island 3,000 years ago. Zramzshra's Finance Minister argues for a reform in which this alphabet will be replaced by the Roman alphabet (the one used in English and many other languages). This change, he argues, will make the island's life easier and more prosperous, with benefits for English teaching, computer-mediated communication, trade, and tourism. Is this the best policy?

In responding to such language related problems, we can draw upon common sense and experience to judge what action should be taken. But in recommending a particular course of action we might benefit both from more information and from a more systematic approach. For example, we might study what other people have said on similar matters, and we might make investigations of our own, perhaps by interviewing the parents and children in the school, observing some Japanese lessons, consulting a third Spanish speaker, and so on. And when—as sadly often happens—the advice we offer, well-informed though it might be, is ignored for political or commercial reasons, or out of prejudice, we might wish to form a pressure group to put across our case more effectively. It is these processes of study, reflection, investigation, and action which constitute applied linguistics as an academic discipline.