

## **OBJECT LANGUAGE AND THE LANGUAGE SUBJECT: ON THE MEDIATING ROLE OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS**

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### INTRODUCTION

As linguistics has extended its scope over the past thirty years from an exclusive concern with knowledge of the abstract code, what Chomsky referred to as Internalized (I) language, to a consideration of the way this knowledge is actualized in Externalized (E) language (Chomsky 1988), so it has inevitably gained in face validity as an area of inquiry relevant to practical life. A linguistics that deals with real, as distinct from ideal, speaker-listeners has a more obvious applicability to the problems real people actually have with language. Nevertheless, one cannot just assume a direct correspondence between the E externalized language the linguist describes and the E experienced language that is a reality for the user. The applicability of linguistic descriptions is a potential that has to be realized, and this is where applied linguistics comes in.

My purpose in this contribution is to look into this question of applicability as it relates to language pedagogy. My concern, in particular, is with L2 learners as a particular kind of language user: At issue is the extent to which linguistic descriptions can adequately account for their reality for learners and so provide a point of reference for the design of language courses.

### LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

In traditional ways of thinking, applicability does not appear to be a problem. Since language is both what L2 teachers teach and linguists describe, it would seem self-evident that the findings of linguistics should be relevant to how the content of language courses is to be defined. Linguistics has always in fact been deferred to as the accepted authority on these matters, the assumption being that the language subject is derived from the linguistic discipline and that the units of description constitute the units for learning. On the face of it, this seems reasonable enough: If teachers cannot draw on linguistic descriptions in the design

of their instruction, where else, after all, can they turn? But they need to know what such descriptions have to offer, and this is something that applied linguists can inform them about. In this view, the content of the language subject is necessarily dependent on linguistic description.

The assumption of necessary dependency goes back a long way. The following can be taken as a representative statement:

He (the language teacher) is not teaching linguistics. But he is teaching something which is the object of study of linguistics, and is described by linguistic methods. It is obviously desirable that the underlying description should be as good as possible, and this means that it should be based on sound linguistic principles. (Halliday, *et al.* 1964:66).

The something that the teacher is teaching, the language subject, is here equated with the linguist's object of study, the object language. But this object is, as I have indicated, describable, and definable, in different ways. The methods and principles employed by taxonomic structuralists, for example, are very different from those of generativists of the Chomsky stamp, which are, again, very different from those of functional grammarians, variationists, pragmaticists, and so on, all of whom would claim that their descriptions are good and sound. So which object of study is to be depended upon to provide the basis for the language subject? In practice, it has been the one in current vogue. Thus, when structuralist linguistics was in the ascendancy, the content of language courses was specified in terms of sentence patterns. With the shift to the pragmatic functioning of language, the units of courses were specified in terms of communicative functions.

It seems to me that this assumption of dependency is mistaken. I want to argue that what the language teacher teaches is **not** the same as the object of study of linguistics, and that what is a 'good' description in reference to 'sound linguistic principles' cannot be assumed to be good for language pedagogy, which has its own principles to refer to. I want to argue, furthermore, that it is precisely because there is a necessary disparity between the principles of language pedagogy and those of the linguistic discipline that applied linguistics has a role to play. In this view, the purpose of applied linguistics is not to assume relevance but to question it, not to engage in application, but to inquire into applicability.

A convenient way of talking about the object of study of linguistics is in reference to Hymes' well known formulation of the components of communicative competence: the formally possible in respect to the resources of the code available, the feasible in respect to mental processibility, the appropriate in respect to the context, and the done or attested in respect to actual occurrence (Hymes 1972). The first two can be seen as features of I-language, the second two as features of E-language. Different approaches to linguistic description can be seen as giving prominence to one feature rather than another, and, as I have suggested, pedagogy

has generally followed suit. Thus, with the extension of linguistic description to account for E-language, we shift from a 'structuralist' pedagogy of the possible to a 'communicative' pedagogy of the appropriate. What has been generally disregarded is that in Hymes' scheme the possible is also an intrinsic aspect of communication. This is, in part at least, because Hymes presents these different features as separate components and does not inquire into their **relationship**. I have discussed this elsewhere (Widdowson 1989), and this is not the place to deal with it again in detail, but we need to note that this matter of relationships is a crucial one, for in a normal experience of language, **all** of the features Hymes mentions come into play and interact in complex ways. If the object of description is fixated on one feature, then it cannot correspond with user reality, and this, in turn, raises questions about the relevance of any linguistic theory as a model for pedagogy.

### CORPUS LINGUISTICS, AUTHENTIC LANGUAGE, AND TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION

The concern over linguistic objects of description is not limited to formal generative linguistics. Rather, this concern also extends to what is in many ways the most important and influential development in E-language description over recent years, that of corpus linguistics. The 'goodness' of a linguistic description is now increasingly being measured against corpus analyses. The computer provides us with the capability of accumulating and analyzing vast amounts of language that users have actually produced. We no longer have to depend on our own intuitions about the language that people use, or on eliciting from them what they **think** they use. We can now establish patterns of usage as a matter of observed fact. This trend is, par excellence, the description of the attested in the Hymes scheme. It is obviously a highly significant development which has already had momentous effects on linguistic description. Nobody these days would contemplate writing a grammar or dictionary which did not take account of corpus findings. But we need to note that for all the facts they reveal, and in spite of what is often claimed, these findings are confined to one feature of language, namely the attested. They do not capture an absolute reality but a partial one. So, although they provide additional information of immense interest, it would be a mistake to suppose, in our enthusiasm, that they thereby make all other accounts of language null and void.

We should recognize, to begin with, that corpus analysis is not a different and improved way of dealing with the object of study of linguistics, it changes the object of study itself. There is a radical shift from one kind of reality to another—from language internalized as competence, as something people know, to language externalized as performance, what people do. This, one might say, is a salutary shift. There was in the past too much emphasis on knowledge dissociated from behavior, too exclusive an attention paid to the possible (the encoded resources of the language as known by its users), without regard to the actually attested (what the users actually produce in the way of message forms drawn from these resources). This limitation may be conceded. But then we should be wary

about going to the other extreme and denying any significance to the possible that is not attested, of taking up a neo-behaviorist position that denies any validity to knowledge that is not acted upon and overtly realized, and that takes reality to be only what can be quantitatively measured (see Widdowson 1991).

We need to note too that the object of study in corpus linguistics is a particular language in itself, *sui generis*, not as representative of language in general. We get detailed information about patterns of occurrence of English (or French or Spanish) but nothing in the way of underlying abstract categories which might relate them since these, obviously enough, are never directly manifested in behavior.

Corpus analysis, then, can only, of its nature, reveal what is overtly done (the attested message forms), not what is covertly known (the possible or encoded potential of the language). Moreover, it cannot reveal what is **meant** by what is done either. We come here to a third of Hymes dimensions of communicative competence: the appropriate, the keying of language in with context. Now we may accept that formalist linguistics, with its exclusive concern with the abstractions of the possible, is bound to represent language as remote from the experience of its users, since this knowledge only becomes a reality for users when it is actualized as behavior. But just the same point applies to the dissociation of the attested from the appropriate. What is attested is text. This is the perceptible trace of discourse enactment—that pragmatic activity whose meaning is realized in relation to contextual conditions of various kinds. It is this meaning achievement that constitutes language reality for users. People do not set out to produce texts: Texts simply occur incidentally as a consequent **by**-product of the discourse process. So to isolate texts from the contextual conditions of their production is necessarily to create an analytic construct which cannot represent language reality as experienced by users quite simply because users do not experience texts in contextual isolation.

The description that corpus analysis provides, then, is necessarily partial in that it privileges one aspect of language. It deals with the attested message forms, but not with the possible or potential of the code from which they are drawn, and not with the contextually appropriate conditions whereby message forms are assigned pragmatic meaning. Now it is important to stress that this view does not deny the validity of such text description, but only to recognize that, as with descriptions that privilege other aspects of language, its validity is bound to be limited. Corpus linguistics has enormous appeal, of course. It provides a genuinely innovative set of discovery procedures for revealing textual facts not immediately accessible to introspection or elicitation. But its very appeal should make us wary of any claims it might make to be a comprehensive account of language.

So far, I have discussed the descriptive adequacy of corpus accounts of language. What of its applicability for language teaching? How far can it, or should it, determine the specification of course content? In some people's minds,

the relevance is self-evident, and to question it is to encourage the complacent reliance on outmoded approaches to description. This view, following the well established tradition that I referred to earlier, assumes that the language object that is described is the same as the language subject that is to be taught, and since corpus linguistics provides the best possible description, accounting for 'real' language rather than some idealized version of it, it stands to reason that its findings should determine the content of language courses. So it is that John Sinclair, who, more than anybody else, has inspired the development of corpus based descriptions of text, proposes the following precept for language teachers:

Present real examples only (Sinclair 1997:30).

Real examples of what, though? As I have argued, all that corpus descriptions can yield are examples of **text**, and text only has reality for its producers when it contracts a relationship with context in the discourse process, in other words when the attested is **related** to the appropriate. So if textual examples are to be drawn from actually occurring usage, they can only be made real as communication if there is some context that they can be appropriately related to. In this respect, examples of the attested are no different from examples of the possible. Consider the following:

- 1) I have a little book here by a lady called Mystic Meg.
- 2) I have a little book. The book is here.

The first example is from the COBUILD Dictionary of actually occurring English and so a real example and to be deemed suitable for pedagogic presentation. The second example is a pair of sentences that I have invented myself and in this respect unreal and so presumably unsuitable. But in both cases what we have are stretches of inert language which need to be activated by some kind of appropriate contextual connection for them to be realized as meaningful. It is of course true that the first, as an instance of the attested, an extract from text, **did** originally have appropriate contextual connections, whereas the second, as an instance of the possible derived directly from the code, never did. But this distinction is pedagogically irrelevant since the original context of the first is unknown, and even if it were known could not be replicated in the classroom anyway. So in both cases the teacher has to somehow contrive an appropriate context of some kind which would make the examples meaningful to learners, and this contextualizing would be infinitely easier to do for the second example than for the first. Indeed, 'unreal' examples like the second are expressly contrived to make them realizable in the contextual conditions of the classroom. In other words, the likelihood is that the 'unreal' example can be more readily **made** real for learners than the 'real' one.

In spite of the clear benefit with the use of 'unreal' examples, there is a persistent prejudice against such contrivance. For example, Willis (1990) notes the following:

Contrived simplification of language in the preparation of materials will always be faulty, since it is generated without the guide and support of a communicative context. Only by accepting the discipline of using authentic language are we likely to come anywhere near presenting the learner with a sample of language which is typical of real English (1990:127).

But the 'real' examples of attested text are also simplified: They are message forms that are dissociated both from their source in the code potential of the possible and from the complexity of the normal contextual conditions that made them communicatively appropriate in the first place. The original communicative context that constituted their 'guide and support' is no longer in evidence. A context has to be reconstituted in some way, and it has to be appropriate to classroom conditions. In classroom settings, it is not the case that contrived language is 'generated without the guide and support of a communicative context.' It is simply that the communicative context itself has to be contrived so as to be real for learners and effective for learning. I would argue that we must have the discipline to deny ourselves the easy assumption—that authenticity is transferable intact in the text from one context to another. What we need to recognize is that it makes no sense to present learners with 'real' examples of text unless they can make them real for themselves.

Returning to the general point, it is misleading to suppose that the object of linguistic description is the same as the subject of language teaching. What linguists produce are partial accounts of language, and different approaches to description are partial in different respects. The question is what insights can be drawn from these accounts that are relevant to the pedagogic design of language courses. Corpus description, as one kind of account, has enormous appeal. A description that promises to provide real English for the first time is bound to be appealing to teachers. Who wants to be accused of teaching **unreal** English? *Real, authentic, naturally occurring* are expressions which have (in corpus linguistic terms) a positive prosody, and *unreal, inauthentic, contrived, artificial* a negative one. The appeal is difficult to resist.

This allure is all the more reason for questioning its validity for language teaching. The direct application of corpus description to language teaching is rooted in a misconception about the nature of the language subject. The language subject is not the same as the language as known and experienced by its users. It is something which is necessarily designed to account for the fact that the language is **foreign**. The reality of the language for its users is a function of its familiarity. The reality of the language for people learning it is precisely the opposite: It is a function of its **unfamiliarity**, its **foreignness**, something that primary language users cannot possibly experience. And the language will, of course, be foreign in different ways for different groups of learners. It is this foreignness that the language subject has to be designed to accommodate. So there are two kinds of language reality here. The interesting question is how they are to be related, what

relevance the description of one might have for the design of the other. But it will not do to conflate the two, or seek to impose one on the other by fiat.

It is not only in the specification of course content that we find what we might call the dogma of the authentic, the uncritical belief in the transferability of reality from the context of use to the context of instruction. We find it too in the design of classroom activities where language is not just presented but engaged with so as to activate the learning process. The activity which has been particularly commended over recent years is the **task**. This involves the learner in using language contingently to solve a problem and, as such, is defined as distinct from an exercise, which simply requires the learner to solve a language problem *per se*. The design of a task has to satisfy two crucial pedagogic conditions. One is that the problem that is set has to engage learners in what they will take as purposeful activity; in other words, it has to be appropriate to their reality. The second is that it has to be effective in activating their learning, which means that it has to develop their knowledge of the possible, the meaning-making potential of the code. Neither of these conditions depends on replicating the reality of **user** experience. And yet those who talk about tasks regularly invoke this reality as a necessary design feature. Thus it appears as one of the criteria that Skehan (1998) specifies as definitive of a task

...a task is regarded as an activity which satisfies the following criteria:

Meaning is primary.

There is a goal which needs to be worked towards.

The activity is outcome-evaluated.

There is a real-world relationship (1998:268).

He comments on this issue as follows:

...the real-world relationship implies that an activity focussed on language itself cannot be a task. A transformation drill, for example, is an activity which fills class time, but does not happen in the real world and so fails to meet this criterion (1998:268).

The assumption Skehan makes here is that, as with Willis's communicative contexts, there is only one real world—that of the language user—and this must be replicated if the learning activity is to be valid. However, this assumption ignores the fact that what happens in the real world of language users may be utterly unreal for learners, for they inhabit quite different worlds. Furthermore, learners are quite capable of creating worlds of their own, of appropriating the language to their own purposes and making it real for themselves on their own terms. Even such activities as a transformation drill can be converted by learners into something real and meaningful whereby they exploit the very foreignness of the language (see Kramsch and Sullivan 1996, Sullivan to appear). Learners can engage with language, and learn from it, without reference to the kind of transactional goals and outcomes by which user-language use is evaluated. They may indeed subvert

presumed goals and outcomes by language play, which, as Cook (1997; 2000) argues, has a powerful reality of its own and is an effective device for learning for children and adults alike.

### LINGUISTICS, LANGUAGE TEACHING, AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS

The object language which linguists describe is, then, one kind of reality: that of user experience in the contexts of 'normal' social interaction. The language subject is another and quite different reality, one which has to be contrived to be appropriate to other contextual conditions. Looking into the relationship between them, between linguistic description and pedagogic design, is a matter of mediating between two domains of inquiry, each with its own principles and conditions of adequacy. It is this mediation which is the central business of applied linguistics. In the past, the orthodox view was that the language subject and the object language of description were the same and that, since linguists were expert in description, they had the authority to tell teachers what to teach. Given the academic prestige of linguistics, and the relatively humble status of pedagogy, teachers have tended to concede the authority. This persistent belief in unmediated application necessarily denies any distinctive role for applied linguistics and simply equates it with linguistics applied (see Widdowson 1980), which linguists can do for themselves: Mediation is merely meddling. Such a position would seem to be John Sinclair's view:

Applied linguists, I have the impression, see themselves as mediators between the abstract and heady realms of linguistic theory and the humdrum practical side of language teaching (1998:84).

As far as I am concerned at least, the impression is entirely correct. As an applied linguist, I do indeed see myself as a mediator. From the perspective of outsiders, linguistic theory may indeed be a heady realm, and language teaching humdrum practice. And this is just the kind of difficulty that mediation has to deal with by showing that what is commonly dismissed as heady and abstruse can also be interpreted as providing a legitimate intellectual perspective, that theory can be relevantly related to language teaching (as to other areas of practical life) to make it more meaningful and less humdrum. Without mediation, the domains remain self enclosed: The heady just remains heady, the humdrum humdrum.

One might, of course, accept the need for mediation but deny the need for mediators, arguing that linguists are perfectly capable of doing it for themselves. The evidence would seem to indicate, however, that they find this difficult to do. This is not surprising, actually, for it would require them to distance themselves from their own disciplinary perspective and relate linguistic knowledge to a quite different perspective. Linguists have authority in their own domain: They describe language **on** their own terms and **in** their own terms. There is no reason why they should assume the responsibility of acquiring expertise and authority in the quite different domain of language pedagogy. It is not their business. The linguist, qua

linguist, is in no position to judge the pedagogic relevance of linguistic theory and description, and some linguists recognize this well enough. Chomsky is one of them.

It is often pointed out that Chomsky, in a talk at a teachers' conference in 1965, expressed his own skepticism about the relevance of linguistics for language teaching (and by implication the validity of applied linguistics), and his remarks are frequently cited, with some glee, as if they settled the question once and for all. But Chomsky, as linguist, has no authority to pronounce on the matter, and right at the beginning of his talk he makes his position quite plain:

I should like to make it clear from the outset that I am participating in this conference not as an expert on any aspect of the teaching of languages, but rather as someone whose primary concern is with the structure of language and, more generally the nature of cognitive processes (1966:43).

And later in his talk we find the following disavowal:

It is possible—even likely—that principles of psychology and linguistics, and research in these disciplines, may supply insights useful to the language teacher. But this must be demonstrated, and cannot be presumed. It is the language teacher himself who must validate or refute any specific proposal. There is very little in psychology or linguistics that he can accept on faith (Chomsky 1966:46).

As we have seen, not all linguists would be so cautious and deferential. Some would assume usefulness without further ado and presume to propose precepts for teachers based on linguistic authority. One might, of course, retort that what Chomsky says applies to **his** linguistics, a linguistics only of the possible, an idealized, armchair abstraction which everybody knows is useless because it does not describe use. With linguistic description that deals with attested reality, the situation is different.

But how is it different? To begin with, a moment's reflection will reveal that Chomsky's linguistics was not useless at all. It had an enormous influence on how people concerned with pedagogy thought about language. His insights effectively led to a fundamental reconceptualization of the nature of the language learning process, and consequently of how language was to be defined as a subject. It was Chomsky who challenged the orthodox pedagogic view of the time that learning was a matter of habit formation to be induced by pattern practice and structural drill whereby learners were constrained into conformity. He made us conceive of learning in a totally different way, as an essentially cognitive and creative process in which there was room for learner initiative. This reorientation, in turn, led to a revision of the concept of error and a radical reappraisal of teacher and learner roles. All of the ideas about autonomous learning, problem solving, the distinction between overt participation and covert engagement, and the defining

of classroom activities in terms of tasks rather than exercises can be traced back to Chomsky's insights about the nature of language.

These pedagogic consequences, however, were not a matter of direct application but of indirect implication. As has been frequently pointed out, attempts to formulate course content in reference to formalist categories proved to be misguided. What was significant about Chomsky's ideas was that they led those concerned with pedagogy to redefine the nature of the language subject in cognitive rather than behaviorist terms. It is a nice irony that the current rejection of his linguistics of the possible in favor of the linguistics of the attested marks a return to behaviorist principles. Clearly, however, students do not learn a language by accumulating message forms, but only by inferring from them some underlying encoded potential; in other words, they learn by relating the attested to the possible, and the subject has to be designed in such a way as to guide them to do this. But learning cannot occur if it is determined directly by a description that only deals with overt attested behavior, particularly if this behavior is only that of the experienced language of the user. Here we return to the distinction made earlier between the object language of user experience and the language subject as designed for learners. The point I made about the language subject was that it was essentially concerned with the foreignness of the language and so could not be equated with the language of familiar user experience. Since this foreignness can only be recognized in relation to another language, it follows that English (or French, or Spanish) as a foreign language is necessarily a bilingual subject. Students learn the foreign language in relation to the language (or languages) they already know. They can only relate the language they know to the language they do not by reference to abstract categories of the possible.

To the extent that the language subject must incorporate the possible, it cannot be defined in reference only to descriptions of the attested. Both aspects of language have to be taken into account. And both, as I indicated earlier, have to be related to the appropriate. Whether one is drawing the content of courses from message forms which are contrived exemplifications of the code, or from message forms which are sampled from actually occurring text, they need to be made real for the learner. The message forms have to be made locally appropriate to the different classroom contexts in which learners find themselves.

What I have said about the necessary adequacy of linguistic descriptions as models for course design applies both to formalist approaches and to the findings of corpus analysis. Both provide insights into language of immense interest, but their pedagogic usefulness for the language subject 'must,' in Chomsky's words, 'be demonstrated, and cannot be presumed.' The only difference is that the proponents of one approach do not presume, whereas those of the other do.

It seems to me that Chomsky, that arch fiend of useless formalist linguistics, gives us a clearer indication of the role of the linguist than many who claim a necessary pedagogic relevance for their partial descriptions of 'real'

language. What he says in this regard also allows us to see where the applied linguist comes in. 'The usefulness of insights that linguistics supplies must be demonstrated,' he says, and he never said a truer word. But then who is it that does the demonstrating? Who is to be the agent? The teacher? But how do teachers recognize these insights in the first place? Linguists, as I have said, describe language on their own terms and in their own terms; in other words, they develop their own specialist discourses to suit their own disciplinary perspective on language. They would not have insights of any interest to offer if they did not. Their perspective, however, is not a pedagogic perspective. So whatever insights might be forthcoming cannot simply be **supplied**, retailed from one discourse domain to another. A third party, a mediating agent, must make these insights intelligible in ways in which their usefulness can be demonstrated. In other words, we need the applied linguist.

I have been talking here about mediating a relationship between linguistics and language teaching, the principle of mediation applies more generally to the relationship between any disciplinary discourse and the areas of its potential applicability, between abstraction and the actuality of experience. There is never any direct transference. Disciplines can, of course, and routinely do, use human beings empirically as a source of data. But you cannot then reconstitute, or replicate, human beings from the data. As we have seen, the language data that corpus linguists describe may reflect one kind of reality, but it is not one that can be equated with the reality that students experience when they are learning a foreign language in the classroom. Whatever insights such description offers, they are a function not of transference but of translation, mediated into a form where their usefulness might be realized. They cannot just be supplied.

So linguistic insights are created by mediation. But, equally, so is the usefulness. Applied linguistics is often said to be concerned with the investigation of real-world problems in which language is implicated. But this seems to suggest that problems, like insights, are somehow there, that somebody in the real world supplies a problem, the linguist supplies an insight, and the applied linguist matches them up. But things are not like that. To begin with, problems are perceived and formulated in culturally marked ways; in other words, they belong to particular discourses, and it is likely that they will need to be reformulated so as to make them amenable to investigation. It may indeed be the case that what people identify as a problem is simply the symptom of another one that they are not aware of. In a sense then, investigation, which of its nature belongs to a discourse other than that of the problem, will necessarily reformulate it, and change it into something else, which in turn may create problems that were not perceived at all in the first place. Just as linguistic insights are a function of the mediation, so are the problems they are related to. The process brings together two discourses, or two versions of reality, and this requires an adjustment of fit whereby an area of convergence is created, compounded of elements of both discourses but belonging exclusively to neither.

Since the area of convergence belongs to neither discourse, proponents of both are likely to be somewhat ambivalent about it. Thus language teachers, for example, may, and indeed often do, think of mediation as an unwanted, and unwarranted, intrusion on their domain. And there are times when it is: when we get linguistics applied, as distinct from applied linguistics, the process whereby linguistic findings are foisted on pedagogy on just the presumption of relevance that Chomsky warns us against. Conversely, linguists may feel that the area of convergence is a misrepresentation that disfigures their discipline. Applied linguists thus find themselves in an anomalous position, in a no-man's land they have made for themselves, and not infrequently under fire from both sides. It is not surprising that they should so often feel insecure, nor is it surprising that the straightforward unmediated process of linguistics applied should be so appealing. You only have to be a linguist to do that.

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