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# "APPLIED LINGUISTICS IS A BRIDGE"

## SOME GENERAL COMMENTS ON APPLIED LINGUISTICS

## WITH SOME PARTICULAR COMMENTS

## ON THE TEACHING OF GRAMMAR AND COMMUNICATION

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Applied Linguistics is a bridge. On this side are the practical concerns of teachers and course designers, inspectors and planners. On the far side are the theoretical and descriptive concerns of linguists together with their hyphenated and unhyphenated colleagues - socio-linguists, psycho-linguists, philosophers and anthropologists among them. I put the practical people on 'this' side because it is with them that applied linguistics starts, from them that it draws its meaning and its purpose. It is not that linguists decide to ask, 'How can our theories and descriptions be applied, how can we be practical?'; rather it is that teachers and other concenred in teaching ask, 'How can our problems be solved in a systematic way, how can we be theoretical?'

Applied linguistics is thus necessarily interested in both practice and theory: it attempts to link the two. It fails in its purpose if it does not do so.

Like other disciplines, applied linguistics is normally in a state of change. How it thinks and what it thinks about and how it talks about its thoughts are all matters which are subject to external and internal influences. The latter come mainly from dynamic individuals (or groups) who have for the time being succeeded in capturing the attention of their colleagues (I shall mention a few later). The former,

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as the nature of the discipline suggests, may come from two sources: the evolving needs of language learners and their teachers; and the current preocupations of the linguistic theorists and descriptivits.

In recent years there has been a notable coincidence of pressing practical problems and exciting developments in theory, a coincidence that has been made fruitful by the work of just such individuals as I mentioned a moment ago, who have been able to understand both sides and to draw some forceful and pertinent conclusions. I will not say that any problems have been solved; only that they have been very energetically thought about, talked about and written about, to the extent that materials and textbooks and whole programmes of language teaching, as well as teacher training, have appeared which show clearly the impact of these events and which can now be evaluated on the basis of actual classroom experience and tangible results.

In saying this I have in mind particularly one movement in applied linguistics, the movement that has produced what is most often called the 'Communicative Approach' to language teaching. The success of this movement has given rise to renewed thought about a problem in language teaching that is by no means a new one though the terms in which it is discussed today are mostly rather recent inventions. I shall call this the problem of Grammar and Communication. Here, briefly, is the background to it.

Nowadays, no-one doubts (or no-one I know doubts) that knowing a language - to the point of being able to speak it, understand it when spoken, read it and

tical competence. It also involves I suggest, at least (2) 'pragmatic' knowledge (roughly, knowledge of the world and what people do in it) such as knowing the difference between the past and the present and the future (I mean times, not tenses ), or between specific and nonspecific objects, or between probability and

possibility, or between events and states, or between being rude and being polite, or between making a promise and issuing a threat; and (3) knowing the 'rules of use' of a grammar for expressing and doing these various things and for linking such expressions and actions together in discourse, that is in continuous speech or writing; and (4) knowing how the rules of use are sensitive to different social situations, i.e. how language behaviour varies according to 'where' it takes place: between whom, on what occasion, in what setting. All of these different sorts of knowledge together add up to what is now usually called 'communicative competence'.

Nowadays no-one doubts, either, that communicative competence is just exactly what learners must be assisted by their teachers to acquire when learning a new language. The communicative needs of learners are not, of course, always the same; but the needs are always communicative. Any good syllabus will obviously need to take account of both these facts.

So here is the problem: granted that communicative competence has more to it than knowing grammar; and granted that what learners need is to behave communicatively not just grammatically; how should a syllabus be organised? - around grammar? Or around Communication?

First let me try to clarify this difference.

The syllabus which is organised around grammar (taking 'grammar' in a broad sense to include the phonology and literal meanings of a language as well as its morphology and syntax) is essentially a list of sounds (the individual phonemes as well as patterns of stress and intonation), of morphological and syntactic categories (like tense, modality, subject, object, interrogative, declarative), and of vocabulary items (selected for frequency and range).
The syllabus which is organised around communication is essentially a list of 'situations' (like 'at the restaurant'

or 'in a seminar'), 'activities' (like conversing, telephoning, letter-writing, listening to the radio), 'functions' (like ordering, thanking, defining, explaining) and 'notions' (like time, probability, cause, specific-ness). The grammatical syllabus does not, of course, ignore the fact that the object of language teaching is the acquisition of communication skills; it simply does not put communication first, does not make it the basis of its own internal organisation. The communicative syllabus, likewise, does not ignore the fact that communication skill presupposes knowing grammar. It simply does not put grammar first, does not make it the basis of its own internal organisation.

The problem. At first sight the answer is: a syllabus should be organised around communication. Communicative competence is what the desired objective is; and it is in terms of communicative categories, such as situations, activities etc, that we can best specify the learners' needs. The trend in recent years has been to accept this view. The growing demand for the teaching of tailor-made courses in English for specific pusposes (purposes social or occupational or academic) has caused applied linguists to think about how the needs of learners can be stated in communicative terms and how the situations, activities, functions and notions can be linked to actual language forms (tenses, aspects, sentence patterns, etc). The growing interest of linguists in meaning and social context, as well as in the description of discourse, has given applied linguists the theory (or some of it) and the descriptive framework (to some extent) that they need in order to cope with the difficulties in their way. The bridgebuilders in this case have included some now well-known personalities whose views have gained wide recognition, and some considerable acceptance, through their University teaching and their academic papers, and also through a number of well-known books for example, Munby (1978), Van Ek (1976), Widdowson (1978) and Wilkins (1976).

It is true to say that this movement in applied linguistics that has produced the communicative approach has achieved impressive success at unprecedented speed. A measure of the success is that 'communicative' or 'functional' or 'notional' have become almost obligatory terms in the description of any newly published course. A measure of the speed is that within a decade of the beginning of the movement some of its leaders and supporters are beginning to be assailed (or perhaps we should merely say disturbed) by doubts. Has the movement been too successful? Does this beautiful bridge lack firm foundations? Does it take us anywhere very useful after all?

I was asked to say something about applied linguistics that was encouraging to language teachers. So I shall answer these questions in as encouraging a way as possible.

The communicative approach has helped to change the language teacher's view of language; it has given him a framework for thinking of language in terms of communication and it has helped him to put grammar in its place - within the wider constellation of communicative competence. It has assisted him to think about the actual needs of learners, and to specify those needs in a socially or occupationally convincing manner. It has encouraged him to devise and to use methods calculated to result, on the learner's part, in a real capacity for effective communicative action - for doing things with language, not just manipulating forms in accurate but futile patterns. Of course, much remains to be done in the study of situations, activities, functions and notions, and even more so in the study of how meanings are patterned and expressed in the production of discourse, whether spoken or written. But we would not even know how little we know if it were not for the modest successes in research so far achieved.

There are, however, two respects which I should mention in which this particular enterprise in applied linguistic bridge-building has been less than entirely successful.

First, starting as it did from the needs of specific purpose learners (for example those needing English in order to follow courses of postgraduate study, or in order to practice medicine, or to be businessmen or secretaries) it has tended to ignore the general-purpose learners - the millions of pupils in primary and secondary schools, especially those for whom English is a second language to be used in their own education or as a language of wider communication within their own country; or else it has assumed, on no very firm grounds, that a communicative approach is right for/too. Second, in concentrating on what some linguists/them have recently begun saying about communication, it has to some extent lost sight of what most linguists have long been saying about grammar.

What linguists have long been saying about grammar is, of course, that the grammar of a language is a system. It is not a collection of unconnected bits. The same is true, though less obviously perhaps, of the vocabulary of a language. Just as we cannot really know the meaning of orange without also knowing the meaning of yellow and red, so we cannot really know the meaning and use of the past tense in isolation from the present or of the active form of sentence in isolation from the passive. Now, if the grammar of a language is a system, organised knowledge, should not the teaching of a grammar be systematic, an organised process? Modern language teaching (and ancient for that matter) has always assumed that it should. So here is the heart of our problem. The syllabus which is organised in respect of categories of communication will inevitably be disorganised in respect of categories of grammar. What, for example, is the grammar that goes with requesting: past tense or present? declarative structure or imperative or interrogative? modal verbs will and shall or may and can? with what intonation - rising or falling? The question is: if the communication objectives determine the grammar, how will the teaching of grammar be done systematically?

Now in some teaching situations (for example where the needs of learners are specific and limited) we might be inclined to make light of this difficulty: let them pick up the grammar they need just for the things they need to be able to do. But in others (in the teaching of English in Tanzanian schools, for example) we might not be inclined to reason in the same way. To acquire a general communicative ability, surely the learners must be given a general knowledge of the grammar of English, and surely this knowledge (not necessarily made explicit to the learners) must be imparted in a grammatically organised way? Is grammar, then, after all, the indispensable foundation? And is the Communicative Approach - which many applied linguists might regard as the outstanding achievement of their discipline in the 1970s - of no great value in this situation in which Tanzanian language teachers are actually concerned?

I think that the answer is something like this. The grammatical approach imposes order and control on the teaching of the components of the language system in relation to each other. It ensures that these components are learned in the most effective order (in so far as this is determinable) in a grammatically connected way, over a suitable period of time, and that nothing that matters is overlooked. And it can be motivating to the learner. For as new grammatical knowledge is acquired, new communicative opportunities are opened up. The communicative approach imposes order and control on the teaching of the components of the language system in relation to communicative needs: the situations, activities, functions and notions which match the objectives set. It organises the communicative side, makes sure nothing of importance is left out, is perhaps more likely to secure the motivation of the learner (especially where, as in the first year or two of secondary school in this country, the grammar teaching is to a considerable extent remedial), and may even make his work more interesting for the 'hard-passed teacher'. General purpose language courses, it seems reasonable to conclude, need not one or other of

these approaches, but both, both principles of organisation and control. The approaches are not incompatible, indeed they are obviously complementary. But they are different. This means that teachers must always try to have in mind (and preferably on paper too) a 'dual syllabus': in one part the organisation is grammatical and the movement is from grammar to communication; in the other the organization is communicative and the movement is from communication to grammar.

At present, no syllabus I know is quite like this. Perhaps we shall see one some day. But in the meantime I have a practical suggestion: plan your week's work dually. By this I mean not just that you outline the bits of grammar and the bits of communication that you hope to deal with, taking care that the grammar connects systematically with what the class already knows and has most recently done and that the communication is an orderly extension of communication skills already practised; I mean also that the planning of the grammar teaching should include a movement to new communication skills, to new concepts that can be expressed, new acts that can be done, new connections that can be made or understood in spoken or written discourse; and that the planning of the communication part should include a movement to new grammar, so as to ensure that the grammatical (including lexical) foundation is there which the nature of the communication requires.

For example. If you week's work includes revision of the past and present tense (grammar) see how you can move from that to giving practice in the expression of uncertainty or politeness (communication), e.g.

(1) He might be mistaken
(more uncertain than may);

(2) I wanted to ask another question, please
(politer than want).

And if your week's work includes practice in reporting an experiment (communication) move from that to revision of

the passive, of time clauses, and the position of adverbials of manner and degree (grammar), e.g. as in

(3) When the cover was removed from the plant, its green colour was seen to have disappeared completely.

To all this your reaction might well be: What's new? Most teachers do this sort of thing every day without thinking about it. To which my response would be: So much the better. But is it the business of applied linguistics to 'think about it'.

I cannot claim that my suggestion, even from a theoretical point of view, is an original one. Fifty years ago, the Danish grammarian (of English), Otto Jespersen (1924), argued that effective language teaching must move in two directions: from 'inner' to 'outer' and from 'outer' to 'inner'. As he pointed out, when you are in a conversation with someone you cannot cope unless you can operate in both directions: from outer to inner as listener, from inner to outer as speaker. These are just the movements from grammar to communication and from communication to grammar that I am suggesting should form the basis of good syllabus design. If Jespersen had produced a syllabus, it would have been a 'dual' one.

Jespersen would not have called himself an applied linguist. For him the description of language and the teaching of language were closely connected. Today, perhaps unfortunately, the two are distinctly apart. That is why the bridge-builders, who include not only those who call themselves applied linguists, but also all those who think about language teaching in addition to doing it, have their work to do.

NOTE

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# TENSE USE IN WRITTEN DISCOURSE

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## Section 1

## INTRODUCTION

The semantics of verb form use in English represents a considerable source of difficulty for the learner. Within the finite verb group there are thirty two possible combinations of grammatical items, excluding inflection for number. Many of these combinations are traditionally treated as separate 'tenses', such as the 'past continous', 'future perfect' and 'perfect conditional'. For each such tense, a number of different meanings is normally described, thus producing a complex and fragmentary account of verb form meaning. The syntactic description, however, can be simplified by recognising just five oppositions within the verb group, and if we could identify a semantic correlation for each option, verb form meaning could be presented to learners in a more coherent manner. In fact, the active/passive opposition, with its relatively straightforward semantic correlations, is normally presented as a single option within the verb group. For other categories, however, the fragmentary approach complicates the description and obscures possible generalisations.

This paper is based on the hypothesis that there are regular semantic correlations for each grammatical opposition, and that by identifying these, it is possible to produce a more economical and systematic description of verb form meaning. The interpretation of verb forms is, however, to a large extent affected by