

WHAT IS APPLIED LINGUISTICS?

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The question-title of this paper is simple enough to deserve a complicated answer. To start with, David Wilkins once in 1975 (and I will quote him from memory) began a course in applied linguistics by questioning whether this title could be given to any one specific activity; the applications of linguistics, he said, are manifold. Pit Corder (1973) nearly apologizes for restricting the term to activities connected with language teaching but claims for this restricting title the legitimacy which Wilkins seems to deny it.¹ I shall follow common practice though and will use this term to refer to those activities connected with language teaching which I will discuss in the rest of the paper.

From the previous paragraph it will be clear that language teaching and applied linguistics are not synonymous; it is not bold at all to declare that, being different activities, applied linguistics is subservient to language teaching. The latter has been defined as 'creating the right conditions for learning to take place'; language teaching, then, is a series of activities involving decisions about language and other areas whose end-product is the act of teaching in the classroom. What, then, is the place of applied linguistics in this series of activities which constitute language teaching?

It may be easier to answer this question from the point of view of the language teacher. A teacher about to start his job may very well have to ask himself among other things "What, how, and for what purpose am I to teach?". In other words, he will have to think of objectives in teaching ('what for?'), content of teaching ('what?'), and method of teaching ('how?'). Notice these questions have been reordered. The answers would have to be looked for in philosophy, linguistics and psychology in which case language teaching would be making use - as in fact it does - of three different disciplines which would thus be applied to purpose different from their own. This would do as a simple answer: applied linguistics is those activities whose purpose is to determine the content of language teaching. Such a simple answer, however, begs the question. Do we

1 The center for applied linguistics in the University of Reading of which he is the Director is called Centre for Applied Language Studies.

not have objectives, syllabuses and even textbooks already?

In the majority of cases, it is true, objectives in language teaching are set up not by the teacher but by some person or body in charge of educational policies in a given country. In Mexico, for example, the Consejo Nacional Técnico de la Educación (CNTE) has taken care of language teaching objectives in secondary schools. Content of teaching has also been taken care of by the CNTE. Furthermore, every textbook must be approved by the Consejo for use in schools. Finally, the CNTE suggests 'activities' which have clear methodological implications. There seems to be a wealth of resources put at the teacher's disposal by and through the CNTE, but there is the danger that this gives the teacher the impression that there is nothing to be done, that he may feel satisfied with what there is. This is a false impression to say the least. Objectives, syllabuses, textbooks and teaching techniques can be improved. There are many people, including the present writer, who, given the present conditions of teaching in secondary schools, would like to see a reappraisal and reformulation of them. The syllabuses approved by the CNTE, like almost every modern syllabus in the world, are based on structural linguistics' conception of language, i. e. they are grammatically structured syllabuses. Syllabuses of this kind are not "the necessary or the most effective way of designing language courses and, in any case, language learning is not complete when the content of a grammatical syllabus has been mastered" (Wilkins, 1976); to put it another way, the learner must acquire not only the ability to express himself in a grammatically correct way but also the ability to use the right kind of language for the situation in which he must perform. Grammatical syllabuses do not give communicative competence as anyone who having studied English as a foreign language finds out when he visits an English-speaking country. I had to learn to say 'please' in such a situation. One might argue for a paradox from the fact that the Objetivo General proposed by the CNTE cannot be accomplished through the syllabuses approved by the CNTE. But this is a question of defining 'comunicarse' as used by the CNTE and this is not the place to do so. What has been said of the syllabuses must apply too to all textbooks based on them.

The question of objectives and syllabuses is inseparable from the question of methodology. If the learner must learn to speak then the method must be one by which he can acquire this ability, and the language taught him must be the kind of language used by native speakers when they speak which is not necessarily, the same they use when they write. Any method of teaching presupposes a theory of language learning; for example, 'audio-lingual' methods have 'behaviourism' with its techniques of repetition

- 2 For more on 'communicative competence' see Campbell and Wales (1970) and Brody (1977).

and reinforcement as their basis. One can see a very enlightened audio-lingual approach in the 'activities' suggested by the CNTE, but behaviourism has fallen from favour as an adequate theory of language acquisition and with it audio-lingual methods. The field of methodology is in turmoil. It is difficult to offer an alternative to grammatical syllabuses and audiolingual methods; to do so is, possibly, the golden (and very secret) dream of every applied linguist in the world, specially at the elementary level where the most difficult problems lie. I cannot go into that here, but I hope I have shown why applied linguistics has acquired such importance in the last twenty years: because of its subject matter -specially syllabus design and the production of teaching materials- it is at the heart of virtually every activity in language teaching.

And now we can talk about the ways in which linguistics is applied in language teaching. When we ask "What to teach?" we look for the answer in linguistics, 'the scientific study of language'. Among other things linguistics is a theory of language. It tries to explain the nature of language as a human faculty. In what Pit Corder calls a first order-application, linguistics can be used for the description of particular languages according to one or more models. It is these descriptions which interest the teacher of languages because they embody the language he is to teach. Because no complete description of a language is possible the linguist describes the systems which compose it (phonology and grammar especially). It is these systems which give the native speaker the creativity in his language which characterizes him and all speakers of a language. These descriptions use very specialized language which require specialized knowledge to be understood; for one other thing, to present them to the learner as they are is out of the question. But the material is there and the language teacher (or the applied linguist) can use it in what Pit Corder calls a second-order application: a selection of items which will make up the syllabus. Selection is not simple: a language has many varieties (a neutral term used by the sociolinguist in order not to commit himself to the use of more 'coloured' words); Spanish has dozens of dialects in Latin America and Spain; a Spanish speaking country usually has several accents in different geographical regions; a given accent may have dozens of different forms according to whether its speakers are adults or children, men or women, town or village dwellers, etc. Any of these varieties (which are established by comparison) can be chosen to be taught. In practice it is a common core which is chosen, i.e. those items which are common to all or most educated speakers of the language. This comparison between varieties of the same language is one of the techniques of applied linguistics. Pit Corder calls it an intra-lingual comparison. An interlingual comparison is possible (and most desirable) too. It involves a target language (i.e. the language to be learnt by the student) and a native one (i.e. the learner's mother tongue). This comparison establishes similarities and differences between the two languages and these two criteria are then used in the selection of items

for the syllabus. This type of comparison is usually known as Contrastive Analysis (it has been called Contrastive Linguistics and even Applied Linguistics too). Another two types of comparison I will merely mention here: Error Analysis and English for Special (or specific) Purposes. The second order of application of linguistics, then, is comparison (of descriptions within a language or between languages) as a means of selecting the content of the syllabus.

A third order of application is structuring the syllabus; before presentation to the learner it must be organized; there must be an order of presentation. This order is determined -or should be determined- by criteria other than purely linguistic; that is, by psycholinguistic criteria having to do with what is known of the psychology of language acquisition and language learning. Especially important in this respect is that other golden dream: to discover the ideal syllabus, that by which infants acquire their first language. A good number of researchers are busy with this problem at the moment. Given an ordered syllabus the next step is to present it to the learner; this is usually done in the form of teaching materials: textbooks, laboratory tapes, grammars designed for the learner, and in general, any materials through which language is presented to the student. (Teaching materials are not to be confused with teaching aids: pictures, pocket charts, etc.). Especially important is the fact that any teaching material presupposes-wittingly or unwittingly-affiliation to one of the theories of learning. If one is a behaviourist then one's teaching materials will establish the conditions for learning by frequent, accurate and reinforced repetition. If one is a 'cognitivist' then one will want to make use of the learner's mental faculties of reasoning, abstract thinking, etc. One may also be eclectic and take advantage of both theories.

With the elaboration of teaching materials the order of applications is finished. Applied linguistics should have emerged as a number of techniques which bridge the gap between a scientific description of a language and the teaching of that language in the classroom. The end-product of the labour of the applied linguist, then, is the production of a syllabus and of the teaching materials necessary to teach it³. It is unnecessary to say that the teacher in the classroom has always been, and still is, his own applied linguist. It is obvious too that he must continue

- 3 Like Chapter VII on which it is based, the section on the order of applications of linguistics seems to imply that applied linguistics has as its goal the production of a grammatical syllabus; such implication, if drawn from this section, would be misleading. There are several ways in which syllabuses have been organized (see Wilkins *op. cit.*) and there has even been the suggestion that syllabuses are not necessary for the learner who could make his own syllabus if the chance were given to him (see Dakin 1973). Chapter VII does not mention these possibilities so I thought it better to mention them myself even as a footnote.

to be so, or start to be so if he wants to acquire a first-hand experience of these problems. Only in this way will he be able to give expression to his creativity as a teacher. But he must do it with a more conscious knowledge of what the linguistic problems are. It is not superfluous, therefore, to urge him here to invite him to both study theoretical linguistics and learn the techniques of applied linguistics; Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis, Syllabus design, Pedagogic Grammar (construction of teaching materials) English for Special Purposes, Evaluation, and the rest are all terms of common currency in applied linguistics and part of language teaching. They all fall within the teacher's desirable professional abilities.