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## 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 Zramzshran 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.