

Explorations in Applied Linguistics

Explorations in Applied Linguistics

H. G. Widdowson

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot *Little Gidding*

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To S. Pit Corder

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Introduction

This book is a selection of papers that I have written over the past eight years for presentation at courses and seminars in various parts of the world. I am prompted to bring them together in one volume because the reactions they have provoked suggest that they touch on issues of interest to many people concerned with applied linguistics and language teaching pedagogy and although most of the papers have appeared in print before they have done so in publications which are not always very easily accessible. So they are presented here in the hope that they will stimulate wider interest and debate.

Obviously I must believe that the papers have some merit and make some contribution to applied linguistic studies: otherwise I would not have had them put into print in the first place: I do not want to try to disarm the reader with the customary coy apology for publishing them.

What I do want to do in this introduction is to give some idea about the scope and purpose of these papers so the reader will know in advance what to expect and what attitude I would like him to adopt. Actually the title of the book is intended to reflect both scope and purpose, 'applied linguistics' referring to the first and 'explorations' to the second; but a gloss is needed to make this clear.

Applied linguistics, as I conceive of it, is a spectrum of inquiry which extends from theoretical studies of language to classroom practice. The papers appearing here explore issues that can be located at different points on this spectrum: some with a focus on matters of a predominantly theoretical kind, others with a primary focus on matters of practical pedagogy. But in all cases the whole spectrum is presupposed as the context of discussion: thus considerations of theory are linked to pedagogic relevance and demonstrations of practical teaching procedures are linked to theoretical principles. Often these links are made explicit. Where they are not they should be traceable.

These papers, then, are related in conforming to common principles of inquiry. They are also related in that they are all concerned with the same general theme: communicative language teaching. Here some apology is perhaps in order. Communicative language teaching is a banner which

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everybody nowadays wants to march behind. That is why I think it is important that I should make it clear what the purpose of these papers is. We come now to the term 'explorations' in my title.

The term is used with the quotation from T.S. Eliot (cited on the title page) very much in mind. I found constantly that intellectual excursions into theory led me back to starting points in pedagogy where old scenes now took on a different appearance. This is the familiar experience of homecoming and I do not know what importance to attach to such apparent novelty. Looking afresh at problems, placing them in different conceptual contexts, does not necessarily bring them any closer to solution. Solutions are hard to come by in any human situation and in the one with which we are concerned, which crucially involves the interaction of individuals, it is unlikely that we shall find any which are definitive enough to be universally applied. The likelihood is that any such solution would not be a solution at all as far as learners are concerned, although it may be convenient for the teacher to suppose that it is.

So no claim is made that anything has been solved in these papers. They are not meant to be read as prescriptions or conclusive arguments but as attempts to explore ideas, to work out the implications of certain insights in theory for a communicative approach to the teaching of language. What value these papers have lies in the examples they present of the process of exploration itself and in their capacity to incite other people concerned with language teaching to examine the principles of their craft and to submit their practices to critical thought. I am particularly anxious to stress the exploratory and illustrative character of these papers because there is a danger at the present time that the approach which they deal with is being accepted without sufficient examination.

Language teaching is necessarily a theoretical as well as a practical occupation. If this were not so, discussion on the matter would reduce to an exchange of anecdotes and pedagogy would be mere pretence. Yet people concerned with teaching languages too often use the excuse of being practical to supinely accept the directives of others rather than actively think things out for themselves; to be too ready to follow the dictates of fashion without submitting them to careful scrutiny. So it was with the 'structural' approach. So it is now with the 'communicative'. If we are really serious about the teaching of communication, we cannot just exchange notions for structures, functions for forms, and suppose that we have thereby concluded the business. A communicative orientation involves a consideration of a whole host of issues:—how discourse is processed, how interaction is conducted, learning styles and strategies, developmental patterns of language acquisition, the role of learner and teacher—all these and more. There is a great deal of exploration to be done and it is time to put the banner away and start out.

So much for the scope and purpose of this book. Now, briefly, a word

or two about the presentation. The papers have for convenience been arranged in eight sections each provided with a brief introduction which indicates the main lines of argument. The title of each section indicates the focal topic of the papers within it. But of course since all the topics interrelate they naturally recur in the context of other discussions as well. The sections can best be thought of, therefore, as variations on a common general theme, with the first as a prelude and the last as a reprise. This means that the papers do not fit neatly each into each in a sequence of self-contained stretches of argument. No doubt I could have refashioned them so that they did, but this would not have been consistent with the aim of the book, which is, as I have already indicated, to represent the actual process of discovery rather than to put its findings on show disposed to the best possible advantage.

The ideas expressed in these papers owe a great deal to discussion with other people—students and colleagues too numerous to mention by name. I hope that they will accept this general recognition of my debt to them. What I owe to Pit Corder, however, calls for particular acknowledgement. If he had not given me the opportunity and encouragement to pursue applied linguistic studies at the University of Edinburgh, these papers would never have been written. It is only fitting, therefore, that they should now be dedicated to him.

H. G. Widdowson
London December 1977

SECTION ONE

Prelude

This paper represents early efforts to work out certain basic ideas and to establish broad lines of approach to communicative language teaching. To this end I draw a distinction between usage and use and between signification and value. As with other conceptual distinctions (langue/parole, competence/performance, denotation/connotation, and so on), they are a convenience whose validity can be called into question by reference to different ways of thinking. But I have found them serviceable for my purposes and they will reappear in subsequent sections.

The paper relates these notions to developments in linguistic theory. In particular there is a good deal of argument in favour of extending the concept of competence to cover the ability to use language to communicative effect. This case is no longer in court but in 1970 (when this paper was written) people were still busy preparing their briefs. I would be less ready these days to talk about revolutionary changes in linguistics: time, as usual, has altered the proportions of things. But whether or not communicative competence should be accounted for in formal models of description, I would still argue that it needs to be of central concern to the language teacher. What such competence consists of and how the teacher's concern can most effectively be converted into pedagogic procedures are questions which (as will emerge in later sections) turn out on closer inspection to be more complex than they appear to be in this paper. Here communicative competence is more or less glossed as the ability to cope with what I call rhetorical acts in isolation. There is a good deal more to it than that. In my own defence I should point out that I do make reference in this paper to how such acts 'combine to form composite communicative units'. This is an indication of the move that subsequent exploration will take in the direction of discourse.

One last point might be made on this section. There is an assumption here that communicative competence in the form of rules of use has to be expressly and explicitly taught. This assumption is questioned in later papers, and I am now inclined to think that learning and teaching should

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not be regarded as converse activities at all, that the logic of a communicative approach calls for an emphasis on the learner's development of abilities through his own learning processes which the teacher should stimulate rather than determine.

1 The teaching of rhetoric to students of science and technology

In this paper I want to bring into focus a number of problems associated with the teaching of English as a second language, and by implication any other second language, in scientific and technical education. I make no pretence at being able to supply solutions. I do not myself believe that it is the business of applied linguistics to supply solutions to pedagogic problems, but only to provide some of the means by which they may be solved. It seems to me that the aim of applied linguistics is to clarify the principles by which the language teacher operates, or by which he might consider operating, if he is not alienated by arrogance.

The clarification which applied linguistics provides comes about as a result of relating the language teacher's beliefs about and attitudes to language and language learning, as they are revealed by his pedagogic practices, to the linguist's and psycholinguist's discoveries about language and language learning by means of theoretical and experimental investigation. It is particularly appropriate that applied linguistics should be concerned with English for science and technology because it happens to bring into prominence, as 'general' English teaching does not, a question which is one of the principal issues in linguistics at the present time: that is to say, the nature of language as communication. It is fairly rare that a shift in orientation in language teaching and a shift in orientation in linguistics should involve a coincidence of interest, but this, I believe, is now happening.

Let us begin with some obvious and general observations. First: what do we imagine we are doing when we are 'teaching a language'? We speak of developing skills, of making habitual the ability to compose correct sentences. We stress that the primary need is to inculcate in our learners a knowledge of the language system, and we devise drills and exercises to bring this about. At the same time, we do not wish to make our learners into automatons, mechanically repeating sentence patterns and so we insist that pattern practice and the manipulation of the language structures which are taught must be meaningful. We take pains to ensure that language is presented initially in situations which give meaning and point to the language which is being acquired. The general pattern is: situational presentation to make the language meaningful followed by exercises

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in repetition to make it habitual. What precisely are we teaching? We are, of course, teaching something quite abstract: we are teaching the language system: *langue*. This is not to say that we neglect *parole*. You cannot teach *langue* directly since it has to be realized in some way or another, so we use *parole* in our initial presentation and we use it in our exercises. But it is an odd kind of *parole* when you think about it: it is pressed into service to exemplify *langue*. This, of course, never happens outside a language teaching classroom. Normally *parole* only occurs as a result of some kind of social interaction: it does not just exemplify the operation of linguistic rules.

There is an important distinction to be made, then, between the *usage* of language to exemplify linguistic categories and the *use* of language in the business of social communication. When we make use of expressions like 'This is a red pencil' or 'This is a leg' or 'He is running to the door' this is language *usage* not language *use*: it exemplifies but does not communicate.

I think it is true to say that the manipulation of language in the classroom for what is known as situational demonstration or contextualization is meant to indicate what I will call the *signification* of linguistic elements. Thus expressions like 'This is my hand', 'That is his foot', and so on, are meaningful as sentences because they indicate the signification of grammatical items like the possessive pronoun, and lexical items like 'hand', 'foot', and so on. Sentences like these are exemplificatory expressions and are meaningful as projections, as it were, of the language system or code. They are, of course quite meaningless as utterances. It is difficult to see how they could possibly represent any message in any normal communication situation. They are meaningful as 'text-sentences' (to use a term of John Lyons') but meaningless as utterances because they have no *value* as communication.

It seems to me that it is important to stress this distinction. Language can be manipulated in the classroom in the form of text-sentences which exemplify the language system and thus indicate the *signification* of linguistic items. This is not the same as language *use*—the use of sentences in the performance of utterances which give these linguistic elements communicative *value*. In the classroom, expressions like 'This is a red pencil' are sentences; expressions like 'Come here', 'Sit down' are utterances because they have a communicative import in the classroom situation, which provides a natural social context for their occurrence.

Attempts are very often made to bestow communicative value on the language items which are introduced into the classroom, by the use of dialogue, for example. But it is done in a somewhat *ad hoc* and incidental way, and what I have in mind is something more systematic. Even where there is an attempt to give communicative point to the language being learnt, it

is generally left for the learner himself to work out the value. His attention is drawn to the grammatical rather than the communicative properties of the language being presented to him, and the focus is on signification rather than value. I shall return to this point later. For the moment I want to stress that the primary aim of the language teacher is at present directed at developing in his learners a knowledge of the language system, *langue*, using as much *parole* as is necessary to exemplify and establish it in the learner's mind.

I have been using the terms *langue* and *parole*. I think this distinction of de Saussure has provided theoretical sanction for the language teacher's notion as to what is involved in teaching a language. I want to question the validity of the distinction and its relevance to language teaching, and to suggest that the distinction, as de Saussure draws it, is misleading; and that in consequence the language teacher has been misled.

To begin with, though the distinction seems clear enough, when one traces it back to its source in the *Cours de Linguistique Générale* one finds it difficult to pin it down in any very precise way. Lyons says that it is intended to remove an ambiguity in the word 'language' which can refer both to potential capacity and to the realization of this potential in actual speech (Lyons 1968), and, of course, we can see what, in general, de Saussure is getting at. But although he succeeds in removing this particular ambiguity, a necessary consequence is that he introduces other ambiguities. These have recently attracted the attention of linguists; largely, I believe, because their critical faculties have been stimulated by the similar but less equivocal distinction between competence and performance introduced by Chomsky. The precision of Chomsky's formulations have the happy effect of forcing his critics to be precise as well. The ambiguities of the *langue/parole* distinction are pointed out by Hockett:

Wittingly or unwittingly, Saussure had packed two intersecting contrasts into his single pair of terms: some of the time *langue* means 'habit' while *parole* means 'behaviour', but at other times *langue* means 'social norm' while *parole* means 'individual custom'.

Hockett 1968: 15.

Householder provides his own gloss on these remarks:

Hockett remarks quite correctly, as others have too, on the Saussurean confusion of two possible contrasts in the *langue/parole* distinction. He puts it a little differently than I would: contrast (a) makes *langue* mean 'habit' and *parole* 'behaviour', (b) makes *langue* equivalent to 'social norm' and *parole* to 'individual custom'. I would tend to say rather that (a) equates *langue* with 'grammar' (i.e. 'competence grammar') or 'system' or 'structure' while *parole* is 'utterance' or 'performance', while

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(b) says *langue* is the 'common grammatical core' of a social group, while *parole* is the 'idiolect' or 'individual grammar'. Thus what is *langue* under (a) may be *parole* under (b). Of course there may be social groups of many sizes, so that in the (b) sense *parole* is the *langue* of a social group of one (if the limiting case is allowed).

Householder 1970.

The confusion which is revealed by Householder's remarks hardly needs commenting upon. From the social point of view, the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, which on the face of it seems so clear, disappears altogether. Both Hockett and Householder invoke the idea of social norms and such an invocation is fatal to the neat distinction which de Saussure is making. Once one places language in its social context, it becomes apparent that the notion of a common homogeneous system is a figment of the imagination. The paradox in the *Cours de Linguistique Générale* is that *langue* is represented as a social fact which is in some way independent of social use. As Labov points out:

... the social aspect of language is studied by observing any one individual, but the individual aspect only by observing language in its social context.

Labov 1970.

Once one becomes aware of the manner in which language functions in society as a means of interaction and communication, it becomes apparent that a description of language in terms of some homogeneous common system is a misrepresentation. One must accept that the linguist idealizes his data in order to do any linguistics at all, and there is nothing objectionable about this as a heuristic procedure. It could be argued that at the historical moment at which de Saussure was presenting his views the essential problem was to establish some methodological principles upon which linguistics could proceed as an autonomous discipline. This problem he succeeded in solving and linguistics has been able to develop as a result. But the linguist's area of concern as defined by de Saussure does not necessarily coincide with the areas of concern of other people involved in the study of language. The idealization represented by the *langue/parole* distinction happens to leave out of account those very aspects of language with which the language teacher must primarily be concerned.

Householder, as we have seen, glosses the *langue/parole* distinction by reference to the notions of competence and performance. I want now to have a closer look at these notions because it seems to me that they are responsible for the change in the orientation of linguistics which is now taking place.

First of all, it is clear that the competence/performance distinction is not just *langue/parole* writ large: if it were, there would presumably be no point

in coining the new terms. *Langue* is represented as a concrete social fact whereas competence is represented as an abstract idealization: the perfect knowledge of the ideal speaker-listener in a homogeneous speech community. A linguistic description as an account of competence is therefore represented as a well-defined system of rules. The difficulty with an idealization upon which such a description depends is that it cuts the description off from empirical validation. Chomsky and his associates postulate the grammatical rules which constitute the system of the language by reference to their own intuitions. As for doubtful cases, they are prepared, they say, to let the grammar itself decide. As Labov has pointed out, however, it turns out that there are more doubtful cases than Chomsky imagined. This is because there is no such thing as a representative set of intuitions.

Once again, then, we run into difficulties as soon as we look at language from the social point of view. The concept of competence is meant to remove all the complications which are associated with social considerations but the result is that it also removes the possibility of what Firth called 'renewal of connection' with language in actual use. The system of the language as formalized in a generative grammar is thus cut off from the facts of use, and anomalies arise as a result: the ill-defined phenomena of human language, for instance, are represented as a well-defined system of generative rules.

The more explicit definition of competence, compared to the ambiguous definition of *langue* makes apparent the limitations of a linguistic description which depends on the abstraction of some elemental system isolated from, and unaffected by, language in use as a social phenomenon. This is not at all to belittle the achievements of generative grammar over the past two decades, but only to suggest that the depth of insight into linguistic form has been achieved by a narrowing of focus which has excluded many features of language which must somehow be accounted for in a total description. The problem is that many of these features are those with which the language teacher is principally concerned, and this is why generative grammar, as Chomsky himself points out, has such small relevance to language teaching. What exactly is excluded is indicated by Katz and Postal:

We exclude aspects of sentence use and comprehension that are not explicable through the postulation of a generative mechanism as the reconstruction of the speaker's ability to produce and understand sentences. In other words, we exclude conceptual features such as the physical and sociological setting of utterances, attitudes, and beliefs of the speaker and hearer, perceptual and memory limitations, noise level of the settings, *etc.* (my emphasis).

Katz and Postal 1964: 4.

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All of these features are bundled together under *performance*. The very heterogeneity of such a collection suggests that in fact this is a covering term for everything which cannot be conveniently accounted for in the proposed model of description. Performance is, in effect, a residual category containing everything which is not accounted for under competence. The suggestion is that it subsumes everything about language which is imperfect or irregular, all systematic features being accounted for within competence, which is the repository, as it were, of the speaker's knowledge of his language. But it is clear that some of the features listed under performance are also systematic and form a part of the speaker's knowledge of his language (in any normal sense of knowledge), and should also therefore be considered as part of his competence. It is part of the speaker's competence to be able to use sentences to form continuous discourse, as Halliday points out; it is part of his competence that he should know how to use sentences to perform what Searle calls speech acts, Lyons calls semiotic acts, and I call rhetorical acts. In brief, knowledge of a language does not mean only a knowledge of the rules which will generate an infinite number of sentences, but a knowledge of the rules which regulate the use of sentences for making appropriate utterances. An utterance is not just the physical manifestation of an abstract rule of grammar: it is also an act of communication. To know a language means to know how to compose correct sentences *and* how to use sentences to make appropriate utterances.

It seems to me that a revolution is taking place in linguistics against a conceptual order which derives from de Saussure, and which, indeed, served as the very foundation of modern linguistics. There is an increasing recognition of the need to pay as much attention to rules of use, the speaker's communicative competence, as to rules of grammar, his grammatical competence, and that an adequate linguistic description must account for both. Here is where the interests of linguistics and language teaching converge. So long as our concern is with the teaching of 'general' English without any immediate purpose, without knowing in any very definite way what kind of communicative requirements are to be made of it, then the need to teach language as communication is not particularly evident. Once we are confronted with the problem of teaching English for a specific purpose then we are immediately up against the problem of communication. Teaching English as a medium for science and technology must involve us in the teaching of how scientists and technologists use the system of the language to communicate, and not just what linguistic elements are most commonly used. A common assumption seems to be that if you teach the system, use will take care of itself: that once you teach, say, how to compose a declarative sentence then the learner will automatically be able to understand and make statements of different kinds, will be able to define, illustrate, classify, qualify,

describe, report—will, in short be able to perform rhetorical acts and recognize the rhetorical acts of others without much difficulty. In my view, the communicative competence which this presupposes does not come of itself, especially not to those learners outside the European cultural tradition. Rules of use have to be taught with as much care as rules of grammar.

I am suggesting, then, that what I see as a revolution in linguistic thinking should be matched by a revolution in language teaching methodology in order to cope with the kind of challenge which English for science and technology represents. In both cases there is a need to shift our attention away from an almost exclusive concentration on grammatical competence and to give equal attention to communicative competence. Knowledge of a language involves both, and whether we are concerned with the description or the teaching of language, we must concern ourselves with both.

How do we set about teaching the rules of use? Rules of use are rhetorical rules: communicative competence is the language user's knowledge of rhetoric. Traditionally, rhetoric has been represented as a set of prescriptive rules related to impressionistic norms, in much the same way as traditional grammar was represented. Rhetoric is concerned with appropriacy and grammar with correctness, and the reason why the latter has achieved academic respectability whereas the former has not is probably only a matter of historical accident, and probably has something to do with the relatively recent development of the social sciences. There seems to be no reason why rhetoric as the description of communicative competence should not achieve similar standards of precision as grammar has in the description of grammatical competence. Whether the two can be incorporated into the same model of linguistic description is a matter for speculation, but it seems clear that developments in linguistics at the present time are moving towards a rhetorical revival. I should now like to review one of these developments and to indicate in a rather programmatic way what relevance it might have for the preparation and presentation of teaching materials.

The impetus behind the movement towards rhetoric has come from two main sources: social anthropology on the one hand and linguistic philosophy on the other. From social anthropology has come the notion of the speech function; and from linguistic philosophy has come the notion of the speech act.

We owe the notion of the speech act to the Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin, though I suppose it can be regarded as a development of the whole 'meaning is use' movement in philosophy. Briefly, Austin pointed out (Austin 1962) that when we issue an utterance we perform some kind of act over and above the composing of a linguistic form. Thus when I utter the expression 'I'll come tomorrow' I am committing myself to a promise or an undertaking of some kind, and if I utter the expression

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'Come here' I am performing the act of command. Promises, orders, and so on are what Austin called 'illocutionary acts'. One can discover what kind of illocutionary act is being performed by making the act explicit by what he called a performative verb. Thus 'I'll come tomorrow' can be established as a promise or undertaking because one can use the performative verb *promise* and make the utterance explicit: 'I promise I will come tomorrow' or 'I undertake to come tomorrow'. Similarly one can provide a performative verb to make an order explicit: 'I order you to come here'. And so with other performative verbs.

Certain linguists, among them Thorne, Ross, and Lakoff, have made use of this insight and have postulated a deep structure in which the performative verb figures in a superordinate sentence which dominates the rest of the deep structure configuration. Thus we get deep structures roughly paraphrasable as 'I promise you I come tomorrow', 'I order you you come here', and so on. There are two difficulties about this procedure. Firstly, one has to accept that a sentence like 'I order you to come here' and 'Come here' have the same illocutionary potential, that is to say are used to perform the same act of ordering. But it seems obvious that the circumstances in which one would utter one of these are different from those in which one would utter the other. The second difficulty is related to this. In many, perhaps most cases, one cannot tell what act is being performed in the uttering of a certain sentence unless one is provided with a context. To take a simple example: 'I'll come tomorrow' may be a promise or a threat or a confirmation. 'You sound just like your mother' may be an insult or a compliment or neither.

This kind of difficulty points to the principal problem we are faced with in the study of speech acts. What other ways are there of indicating what act a sentence counts as apart from the use of the explicit performative verb? Certain linguistic features serve as signals, but they are not to be trusted: the context of utterance and the conventions of use associated with particular types of discourse very often override the linguistic indicators. One might imagine, for example, that the imperative mood is an unequivocal indicator of the act of commanding. But consider these instances of the imperative: 'Bake the pie in a slow oven', 'Come for dinner tomorrow', 'Forgive us our trespasses', 'Take up his offer'. An instruction, an invitation, advice, and prayer are all different acts, yet the imperative serves them all; and need serve none of them: 'You must bake the pie in a slow oven', 'I should take up his offer', 'Why don't you come to dinner tomorrow?', 'We pray for forgiveness of our trespasses'. But one might suppose, nevertheless, that though there are several different kinds of act that can be performed by the imperative, when an order is to be given it is always the imperative which is used. But this, of course, is not the case either. Just as one linguistic form may fulfil a variety of rhetorical functions, so one rhetorical function may be fulfilled by a variety of

linguistic forms. But the forms which can serve this function are dictated by the conditions which must be met if an order or a command is adequately performed. Here we can turn to the work of Labov for illustration (Labov 1969a).

Labov points out that the conditions which must be met in making a command are as follows: when A commands B, B believes that A believes that at a time T:

- 1 X should be done.
- 2 B has an obligation to do X.
- 3 B has the ability to do X.
- 4 A has the right to ask B to do X.

Labov takes the situation of a teacher asking a pupil to do a piece of work again because it is unsatisfactory. The teacher—A—may frame his order in any of the following ways corresponding to each of the conditions:

- 1 This should be done again.
- 2 You'll have to do this again.
- 3 You can do better than this.
- 4 It's my job to get you to do better than this.

Or, making use of what Labov calls 'modes of mitigation and politeness', the command can be couched in interrogative terms:

- 1 Shouldn't this be done again?
- 2 Don't you have to do neater work?
- 3 Don't you think you can do better?
- 4 Can I ask you to do this again?

Labov also shows how the response to the command can fix upon one of the conditions, and can also be mitigated by the interrogative form.

From a different point of view, Searle (1969) also has established conditions on the performing of speech acts like promising, thanking, congratulating, requesting, warning, and so on. There is, then, a good deal of progress being made in the description of rules of use and the characterization of different rhetorical acts.

Let me now indicate what bearing I think this has on the teaching of English, and in particular on English for science and technology. What people like Austin, Searle, Labov, and others are now trying to pin down in terms of rules and conditions is precisely what language learners need to know if they are to cope with English as communication. I see no reason why the limitation stage of the language teaching process should not be a selection of rhetorical acts rather than of linguistic elements and vocabulary items. There seems no reason at all why we should not, for example, say 'For this course we will select undertakings, promises, warnings, definitions, classifications', and so on rather than 'For this course we

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will teach the simple present tense, present continuous, count and mass nouns', and so on. In fact, on the face of it, there would seem to be a very good reason for focusing on the former. Teaching rhetorical acts like promises and orders necessarily involves the teaching of different linguistic elements and vocabulary items, which are taught meaningfully because they are given a definite communicative import. You do not necessarily teach rhetorical acts when teaching linguistic elements and vocabulary items, as we all know, and what communicative competence the learners do acquire tends to be picked up incidentally. Once we accept the teaching of communicative competence as our prime objective, and once we can see—as I believe we now can see—how communicative competence can be described, then the logic of basing the preparation of teaching materials—limitation *and* grading—on the rhetorical units of communication rather than the linguistic units of the language system seems inescapable.

This approach seems to me to be of especial relevance in the preparation of English for science and technology teaching materials. I mentioned earlier that the conventions of use associated with particular types of discourse very often override linguistic indicators of rhetorical acts. Scientific discourse can be seen as a set of rhetorical acts like giving instructions, defining, classifying, exemplifying, and so on, but the manner in which these acts are related one with the other and the manner in which they are linguistically realized may be restricted by accepted convention. There are many ways of linking different acts to compose larger communicative units like, for example, a report or an exposition or a legal brief, and there are, as we have seen, several ways of performing the same basic act. My guess is that the best way—perhaps the only way—of characterizing different language registers is to discover what rhetorical acts are commonly performed in them, how they combine to form composite communication units, and what linguistic devices are used to indicate them.

Labov has said:

It is difficult to avoid the common-sense conclusion that the object of linguistics must ultimately be the instrument of communication used by the speech community; and if we are not talking about *that* language, there is something trivial in our proceeding.

Labov 1970: 33.

I think it is possible that in language teaching we have not given language as an instrument of communication sufficient systematic attention. We have perhaps been too concerned with language system, taking our cue from the linguists, and in consequence there has often been something trivial in *our* proceedings. Now that we are turning our attention to the

teaching of English for special purposes, and in particular to English for science and technology, we must take some principled approach to the teaching of rules of use, and restore rhetoric, in a new and more precise form, to its rightful place in the teaching of language.

Notes

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