

12 The authenticity of language data

Over recent years we have witnessed an increasing concern on the part of the linguist with the communicative functioning of language. There is a feeling abroad that for a linguistic description to be adequate it must not reduce natural language to an algebraic system but should attempt to account for 'authentic' data, the language user's own experience of language in contexts of use. This movement towards an approximation to authenticity has its dangers: it can lead to a linguistics of anecdote, *ad hoc* observation, and a neglect of methodological principles upon which any systematic account must depend. The shift in perspective within theoretical linguistics has had its influence on language teaching and it is now quite common to find the advocacy of an approach which focuses on communicative activity. The review of what should count as adequacy in linguistic description has led to a reconsideration of the criteria for adequacy in language teaching. But again there are dangers. Too exclusive a concern for 'authentic' language behaviour as communication can lead to a disregard of methodological principles upon which the pedagogy of language teaching must depend. What I want to do in this paper is to point out these dangers by investigating the notion of authenticity with reference to the teaching of English for specific, and particularly academic, purposes.

As I have suggested, applied linguistics has been inspired by recent theoretical explorations of the communicative properties of language to question the effectiveness of a teaching approach which concentrates on the manipulation of structures as an end in itself and to advocate one which takes note of how structures are realized in meaningful communicative behaviour. Both in the theoretical study of language and in the practical teaching of languages communicative competence is in vogue. But although this pedagogic concern for communication derives partly from the influence of a prevailing linguistic fashion, it has been given a particular urgency by changing trends in the English language learning market and the emergence of a new kind of consumer. Previously, the main effort in the teaching of English took place within the context of general primary and secondary education. English was a subject like other subjects and the learner's achievement was measured by examinations designed essentially to validate the syllabus rather than to reflect actual

communicative needs. In these circumstances teaching was required to prepare learners for the examination but not (except incidentally) for an encounter with language use. The belief in general was that what was learnt was a kind of investment, audited, as it were, at the examination, which could be realized as something of real communicative value if and when the need arose. Recently, however, English teaching has been called upon to meet the needs of people who have to actually use the language for occupational and academic purposes. In these circumstances, it has to cope with a connection with the real world and provide for immediate communicative needs. The investment is a short term one and its value will be judged on immediate returns. English for special purposes (ESP), whether these be occupational (EOP) or academic (EAP), requires a teaching methodology which will guide learners towards an ability to handle language in use. Its adequacy can only be measured by its success in achieving this aim. In general ELT or EFL, it is desirable to adopt a communicative approach to language teaching, but we are not likely to incur any drastic penalty if we do not do so. But in ESP such an approach is not only desirable but mandatory since if we do not satisfy the communicative requirements of the learners the penalties are likely to be severe: our methodology will be exposed as ineffective and sooner or later we are likely to be out of a job.

Developments in theoretical studies of language and the practical requirements of learners, then, both converge on the need to adopt a communicative perspective in the teaching of ESP, one that will develop communicative competence and prepare the learner for an authentic experience of language. But how do we set about devising procedures which will bring this about? The point of view has been expressed that since our aim is to enable the learner to produce and process actual language use, then we should expose him to authentic language data right away. This view represents an understandable reaction against the kind of contrived language data which is a feature of many textbooks and which is simply cited to demonstrate how the rules of the language system can be manifested in sentences. The following will serve as an example:

Ali and Bashir are brothers. Every morning they get up at five o'clock and wash their hands and face. They have their breakfast at six o'clock. They have an egg and a banana for their breakfast. They had an egg and a banana for their breakfast yesterday morning. They are having an egg and a banana for their breakfast this morning and they will have an egg and a banana for their breakfast tomorrow morning.

We recognize this as artificial language data which has been contrived for demonstration purposes: it does not carry conviction as actual language behaviour. In this respect it is predominantly an instance of usage rather

than of use, and is comparable with the kind of sentences which linguists invent to demonstrate the working of linguistic rules. It is, we might say, linguistic data without being language data.

But although we may recognize and deplore the artificiality of this kind of data as lacking in communicative potential or implication of utterance, does it follow that all contrivance is necessarily to be avoided and that the only data we should expose learners to should be actual, attested instances of use? We can only arrive at a satisfactory answer to such a question by considering what we might mean when we talk about authentic language.

I am not sure that it is meaningful to talk about authentic language as such at all. I think it is probably better to consider authenticity not as a quality residing in instances of language but as a quality which is bestowed upon them, created by the response of the receiver. Authenticity in this view is a function of the interaction between the reader/hearer and the text which incorporates the intentions of the writer/speaker. We do not recognize authenticity as something there waiting to be noticed, we realize it in the act of interpretation. Thus the reason we see the data just cited as artificial is that we cannot easily respond to it as an instance of use: if we read it as an instance of usage, then it satisfies our expectations and becomes authentic as usage. What is objectionable about it, therefore, is not that it is in itself inauthentic but that we make it so by requiring it to satisfy an expectation which it cannot satisfy: it does not allow us to respond authentically to it if we want to regard it as natural language behaviour.

I wish to argue, then, that authenticity has to do with appropriate response. But what does this appropriacy entail? I think we have to take a deep breath at this point and plunge into a consideration of author intentions. Let us suppose that we are confronted with a piece of written discourse. How do we establish an authentic relation with it? We do so, I suggest, by recovering the intentions of the writer. Now it may be objected that it is never possible to know whether or not we have in fact done this, particularly in written discourse where there is no opportunity for the kind of negotiation of meanings which goes on in spoken discourse. But I think the inaccessibility of intentions has been somewhat exaggerated. The writer of a particular instance of discourse may have individual intentions, but he has to convey these through certain conventions which define the kind of discourse he is producing. If conventions did not exist to mediate the communication between writer and reader, then intentions could not be conveyed at all. Some of these conventions are linguistic and relate to the shared knowledge of the language code: others are rhetorical and relate to the shared knowledge of how the code is used in particular kinds of discourse. So when I speak of appropriate response, I mean the reader's interpretation by reference to the conventions associated with a particular discourse type. Authenticity, then, is

achieved when the reader realizes the intentions of the writer by reference to a set of shared conventions.

It follows from this definition that a discourse may be written in conformity with a set of conventions, but still lack the quality of authenticity for particular readers. When we have conformity on the part of the writer we may say that the discourse is genuine whether or not it is authentic from the reader's point of view. Thus, for example, I may pick up a genuine novel and read it as a political manifesto, thereby not realizing its authenticity as a work of fiction. In short, I am reading it wrongly. Similarly, if I treat a poem as a sample of language for grammatical analysis, the poem is still a genuine poem but it is not authentic as a poem since I do not treat it like one. One of the difficulties of literary uses of language, of course, is that the conventions are frequently very difficult to recognize and the authenticity of some works of literature is so elusive that people will often deny them any literary status whatever.

Authenticity, then, depends on a congruence of the language producer's intentions and language receiver's interpretation, this congruence being effected through a shared knowledge of conventions. It is clear that if this view is accepted it makes no sense simply to expose learners to genuine language use unless they know the conventions which would enable them to realize it as authentic. Thus, confronted with a class of physics students wanting to learn English so as to read textbooks in their subject, I might be tempted to select passages of discourse which are thematically relevant from a whole range of sources on the assumption that I am thereby furthering the communicative purpose for which the learners need the language. But if I then exploit these passages for the traditional kind of comprehension question, structure exercise, and so on, their authentic potential remains unrealized. I might just as well have selected an extract from the Highway Code or *Winnie the Pooh*. The fact that the data is genuine is irrelevant.

If we are to achieve the kind of communicative goals in teaching that ESP requires of us, then we have to confront the problem of how to develop in the learner that awareness of conventions of communication which alone will ensure the necessary appropriacy of response. We do not begin with authenticity; authenticity is what the learners should ultimately achieve: it represents their terminal behaviour.

The belief that one can reach this end simply by exposing learners to genuine instances of discourse is misleading in two respects. Firstly, it misrepresents the essentially interactive nature of discourse. Meanings are not as it were there, present in the text awaiting collection: they are recovered by negotiation with the aid of shared conventions. Discourse is achieved by active interpretation, and unless the receiver is capable of the activity required of him then he can never realize the discourse as authentic. Secondly, it misrepresents the essentially contrived nature of

methodology. The whole point of any pedagogic procedure is to defer the learner's encounter with what he will ultimately have to deal with until he has been prepared to cope with it. The pedagogy of any subject aims at guiding learners towards their terminal behaviour by the contrivance of appropriate intervening stages.

Let us then face up to our responsibilities and consider what might be involved in devising a methodology for the adequate teaching of communicative competence. We will suppose that we are concerned with students of science and that they need English in order to read basic textbooks. How do we proceed? There are, I think, two main stages, the selection of discourse in relation to the assumed terminal behaviour of the learners, and the subjection of this material to a pedagogic processing to ensure the eventual achievement of this behaviour. Selection first. It would seem reasonable to make our selection with reference to the kind of discourse which our learners will be expected to deal with at the end of the course. If this is accepted, it will be obvious that in the case in question we will wish to select written discourse which concerns itself with subject matter related to science (and perhaps more narrowly to particular branches of science). We will be inclined to avoid cooking recipes, economic reviews, and epic poetry. But selection according to scientific subject matter will not automatically yield the kind of discourse that is appropriate to our learners' needs. It is useful, I think, to make a broad distinction between three types of discourse all of which might loosely be referred to as 'scientific'. Firstly we have that which is associated with science as a discipline. This is scientist to scientist communication such as is found in papers published in learned journals. It characteristically trades heavily on an assumption of shared knowledge, not only of the subject matter under discussion but of the rhetorical conventions which control the way it is expressed. These conventions can be ultimately related to the philosophy of science. The discourse of science as a discipline differs rhetorically in a number of crucial ways from the discourse of science as a subject. This is science teacher to science student communication such as is found in textbooks. Whereas the discourse of the discipline is typically referential, ratiocinative, elliptical, that of the subject is typically metalinguistic, didactic, explicit. Its rhetorical conventions derive from the methodology of science teaching. Although they may resemble each other in the sense that they deal with scientific subject matter, these types of discourse may be very different in respect to the rhetorical conventions they conform to (although, as we shall see, these differences are ranged along a continuum which relates the two discourse types). Different from either of these is the discourse of science as a topic of interest. This is journalist to general reader communication such as is found in newspapers and popular journals. Rhetorical conventions vary considerably here depending on the readership aimed at.

Now if we are intent on developing in our learners a knowledge of the conventions which constrain the discourse of science as a subject, then it will not greatly advance our cause if we select our data from other kinds of discourse. We do not very effectively establish the conditions for an authentic relationship between reader and a particular type of discourse by training him in an awareness of conventions associated with a different type. Those who advocate the use of 'authentic' data do not always recognize this: they seem often to be content if the data is thematically scientific. But data which is rhetorically inappropriate is just as 'in-authentic' as that which is thematically irrelevant. A popular newspaper account of a new scientific discovery is no more appropriate to the needs of the learners we are considering at present than is a textbook description of rice cultivation or the principles of the capitalist economy. Indeed it might be less appropriate.

For the kind of students we have in mind then, we would be well advised to make our selection from the discourse of science as a subject. Our range of choice is still very wide, however, and we have to narrow it down even further. We can do this by selecting at the relevant level of instruction, using as source the kind of textbooks that the learner will eventually have to read.

Our next task is to process our material, to prepare it pedagogically in some way so as to bring the learner to the point when he is capable of responding to the genuine discourse we have selected in authentic fashion. This is where the 'doctoring' comes in, the pedagogic tampering with data that the 'authentic data' school complains about. My argument would be that the pedagogic process must necessarily involve some kind of tampering in order to bring learners to the point at which they can realize the authenticity of the language by appropriate response. It is not enough to establish ends which are adequate: we must also establish adequate means for achieving them. The central problem confronting us is how to prepare our material in such a way as to guide the learners to an awareness of the communicative conventions operating in the kind of discourse they will be concerned with.

This problem represents the main challenge of ESP. To meet it, one has to identify the selected discourse in terms of its essential rhetorical conventions and then devise techniques for presenting these conventions in the most effective way. Let us consider the identification aspect of the problem first. I said earlier that the language producer's intentions are accessible to interpretation because they are conveyed by reference to sets of communicative conventions. Some of these are, of course, quite simply linguistic conventions incorporated in a shared language code, and we should not forget that the learning of the code is a necessary, if it is not a sufficient, condition for communication to take place. There is some danger that an over-enthusiastic commitment to communicative language

teaching might lead us to ignore this simple and essential fact. Other conventions are rhetorical: they have to do with how the code is used in the expression of propositions and in the performance of illocutionary acts of different kinds. If we are to describe discourse with reference to these we have to study what propositions are expressed in the particular type of discourse we have selected, how the resources of the English code are deployed in their expression, what illocutionary acts they are used to perform and how these acts are organized into larger communicative units as routines or paragraphs.

But our concern is not with how all these things are done in individual samples but how they are done in this type of discourse in general. We need to typify a kind of discourse, not to characterize a particular instance. I said earlier that a writer is constrained by convention in his writing. He is not, however, thereby denied all freedom of manoeuvre. Scientific textbooks do not conform to a fixed formula. They exhibit idiosyncratic stylistic variations within the limits of shared rhetorical conventions. If these limits are breached, of course, then the discourse becomes accordingly less genuine and the communication is impaired to the extent that the reader cannot make reference to the shared conventions which act as the necessary mediation between intention and interpretation. Authenticity is then difficult to achieve. But even if stylistic variation is kept within limits so that the practised interpreter can recover the underlying rhetoric, for the learner whose task is precisely to learn what the rhetoric is this variation creates additional difficulties.

In view of this, I think there is a case for presenting versions of some of the selected samples in which the idiosyncratic stylistic effects have been filtered out. This, of course, reduces the genuineness of these samples of data but I would argue that such a procedure ultimately helps to establish the authentic relation I have been speaking of in that it makes the rhetorical conventions more accessible to learner response. As teaching proceeds, the filter can be adjusted to allow more stylistic features to appear until the learner is eventually confronted with genuine samples. In this way I believe we can, by sound pedagogic practice, achieve the desired aim of making genuineness correspond with authenticity.

The writing of versions of discourse to foreground rhetorical features naturally presupposes a knowledge of what these features are. This is the ESP challenge I spoke of earlier. The language teacher who adopts a structuralist orientation to his task can turn to descriptive and pedagogic grammar as a source of reference. But we appear to have no descriptive or pedagogic rhetoric to which the ESP teacher can refer for guidance as to how to teach communicative competence. This should not occasion too much dismay, however. I pointed out earlier that the rhetorical conventions of science as a subject derive from the methodology of science. Essentially what this methodology is concerned with is the process

whereby the learner gradually acquires the concepts and procedures of inquiry which define science as a discipline. It represents, therefore, precisely the basic rhetoric of science as a subject which the ESP teacher needs. Furthermore, this very rhetoric has been devised as a methodological procedure for the presentation of just those conventions of thought and expression which the ESP teacher will wish to present as realized through the English language. Hence the pedagogic methodology of science can serve as the guide to the second aspect of our problem: how to devise techniques for presenting the rhetorical conventions of science as a subject in the most effective way.

I do not wish to suggest that all our problems in designing an English for Science programme will be solved by studying the pedagogy of science. For one thing, we still have to consider how its rhetoric is expressed in the particular medium of the English language. For another, we have to fashion techniques which will reconcile the teaching of these rhetorical conventions with the teaching of the linguistic conventions of the code: we are, let us not forget, still teaching English in a second language situation. What I do wish to suggest, however, is that there is a good deal we can learn from our colleagues who are teaching those academic subjects for which we are teaching English. In fact, I want to suggest something rather more than this: that ESP requires a revision of the language teacher's traditional dependence on linguistic description and a readiness to form new alliances. At this point I return to what I said at the beginning of this paper about adequacy.

My argument has been that in ESP we are concerned with developing a methodology which will ultimately provide for the learner's ability to realize an authentic relationship with genuine discourse of relevance to his purposes in learning. I have emphasized that this methodology, like any other, is contrived. But it does not have to be contrived in a contextual vacuum. It can be designed with reference to another methodology whose purpose is to engage the interest of learners in developing their knowledge of a particular area of inquiry, to ensure that what is presented to them takes on the reality of intellectual experience. In other words, this methodology aims at creating an authentic response, and it is only adequate to the extent that it does so. And I think that a language teaching methodology which relates to it can also achieve adequacy through authenticity in the same way. One of the most important effects of an involvement in ESP is that it leads us to recognize that in language teaching we are as much concerned with teaching as with language, that the way other people devise communicative pedagogies is just as relevant as models of linguistic description. In fact, models of linguistic description have not always had a beneficial effect on language teaching. This again, I think, is because teachers have not always recognized the importance of establishing pedagogic principles.

I have said that an uncritical acceptance of the need to present learners with 'authentic' data can lead to an avoidance of pedagogic responsibility. An uncritical acceptance of the authority of models of linguistic description can have the same effect. Teachers have been inclined to be too deferential to linguists in the past, too ready to follow their lead. I do not wish to deny that theoretical linguistics can provide insights which can be exploited in the practical domain of teaching and indeed I pointed out at the beginning of this paper that the impetus towards a communicative approach to language teaching has been inspired in part by developments in theoretical studies of language. But it is perfectly possible, and I would claim necessary, to construct pedagogically oriented models of description which though deriving from such insights are informed also by methodological principles which (as in the case of ESP we have considered) can be established by reference to the teaching of other subjects. Pedagogic descriptions are just as legitimate as are the alternative derivations which are designed to meet the theoretical requirements of formal models of linguistic description: just as legitimate and more adequate for the purpose for which they are designed.

It is important, it seems to me, for the language teacher to recognize that he is the authority in his own domain. Many of the problems in language teaching have in the past been, as it were, self-inflicted, created by the teacher's over-zealous servility in imitating whatever model of linguistic description happened to be currently in vogue. But the teacher should have his own principles of description, his own criteria for adequacy, and these derive from pedagogic considerations. With authority comes responsibility. The teacher's business is the design of effective pedagogic methodologies: those which will lead the learner towards the required terminal behaviour by the shortest possible route. To suppose that, in the teaching of ESP, this will be achieved automatically by exposing the learner to 'real' language is to shirk this responsibility. There is no such thing as authentic language data. Authenticity is realized by appropriate response and the language teacher is responsible for designing a methodology which will establish the conditions whereby this authenticity can ultimately be achieved.

Notes

Paper presented at the TESOL Convention, New York, March 1976, and published in Fanselow and Crymes 1976.