

THE STUDY OF LINGUISTIC AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO ACTUAL LANGUAGE TEACHING PRACTICE

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SINOPSIS

EL ESTUDIO DE LA LINGÜÍSTICA Y SU RELEVANCIA PARA LA ENSEÑANZA DE LAS LENGUAS

Lingüistas y expertos en la enseñanza de lenguas tales como Saussure, Pit Corder, Wilkins, Spolsky, Stern y otros más, han expresado interesantes puntos de vista con respecto a la interacción existente entre estas dos disciplinas.

La primera parte de esta investigación documental tiene como objetivo establecer los fundamentos para que a la enseñanza de una lengua extranjera o segunda lengua se le denomina. "Lingüística Aplicada".

La segunda sección intenta presentar una definición clara de las distinciones planteadas acerca de las diferentes ramas que abarca la lingüística en tanto que teoría y las implicaciones que representa al ser utilizada en la práctica.

Las conclusiones se proponen enfatizar la importancia del estudio de esta disciplina para quienes tienen a su cargo la enseñanza de esas lenguas.

Linguistics is not about language teaching, however, since both have language as their subject matter, there is the possibility that linguistics has implications for language teaching and its methodology. (Wilkins, 1972: 4) It is common place for approaches to foreign language teaching to be contrasted as either "modern" or "traditional". It seems

that what is referred to as "tradition" consists of an alternation between two distinct views of the aims and contents of language (op.cit.:207-29): the "modern" one which sees the aim as a practical mastery, especially of spoken language, and the other or "traditional" one that sees the aim as the acquisition of the rules which underlie actual performance.

Wilkins makes a definite assertion: "language the -very substance of language teaching- has long been the object of the scholar's attention, and the study of languages and language as a human phenomenon is now an autonomous discipline to which we give the name of linguistics" (op. Cit.: 215). Insights or "linguistics" notions increase our understanding of the nature of language and consequently of the nature of learning. These insights can be for instance, the way linguistics defines their relationship between speech and writing; this entails that although teachers may decide that a knowledge of written language is their objective, they cannot overlook the fact that writing is, to a large degree, derived from speech; i.e., teachers will find it probably informative to look at the linguists' discussion of the language / parole distinction.

Linguist and language teacher have to confront similar choices; i.e., the distinction between form and meaning (which is useful in the analysis of learning, but is a distinction that is not maintained in the process of teaching). Problems in language teaching are expected to be solved through the knowledge of the evidence provided by linguistics.

Wilkins concludes that the value of linguistics in the preparation of a language teacher is to provide him with roots for his intuitive interpretations of learning and of language; by increasing his awareness of language, linguistics make him more competent and therefore a better language teacher.

Saussure has referred to language (*langue*) as a self contained whole and a “principle of classification” (1973: 7) which is not to be confused with human speech (*parole*) of which it is only a definite albeit essential part. In turn, Allen (1973: 147) quotes another saying from de Saussure “Linguistics has but one proper subject –the language system viewed in its own light and for its own sake”. Allen comments that one of the most comprehensive statements on the sphere of linguistics studies appeared in a recent (as regards 1973) publication: “Linguistics is concerned with language in all its aspects –language in operation, language in drift, language in the nascent state, and language in dissolution”.

It is the business of the language teacher to know the foreign language, to know how to teach it and to know something about it; Mackey (1973: 251 – 5) avers that it is in relation to this latter need that linguistics might be expected to be useful. He considers that far as language teaching is concerned, there are very few ideas proposed “as applied linguistics” which have not been familiar to teachers at one time or another. He also “predicted” that language teaching would continue to be a “child of fashion” in linguistics and psychology until the time it would become an autonomous discipline which could in turn use these related sciences instead of being used by them.

Corder supports the above, suggesting that a teacher cannot teach a language by any of the current techniques without linguistic knowledge –“what he ordinarily knows about linguistics is considerable, but his knowledge normally suffers from being unsystematic”- he does make constant use of what are basically linguistic concepts in this teaching. (Corder, 1973: 275 – 84). The linguistic knowledge of the most

teachers derives from the theories current half a century or more ago (nowadays called traditional).

With the development of modern linguistic studies in recent years and the tendency to stress their importance in teaching of languages, the term “applied linguistics” became a synonym for “language-teaching studies”.

However, although linguistics studies have an application in language teaching, this by no means implies that linguistics is the only contributory discipline, nor is language its unique application. Linguists can be said to have a “cognitive knowledge of the language”. Linguistics gives us the theoretical basis and the technical means to make descriptions of the languages we are teaching, and the means to compare them and contrast them with other languages. Corder makes a relevant point: “The description of what the learner must know at the end of his course is a matter for collaboration between linguist and teacher, a matter of “applied linguistics”.

The “linguistic syllabus” is a list of linguistic items in the language to be taught. It is not the teaching syllabus, because for this, the items have then to be processed, a selection has to be made and the material has to be ordered into a programme.

Summing up, linguistic knowledge, that is knowledge about languages in general and about a specific language, and consequently the ability to talk about it, has always been fundamental to language teaching. Linguistics is engaged developing techniques to provide a scheme of description which goes beneath the surface form of language and enables us (teachers) to gain an insight into what a person must “know” in order to speak a language.

Also, according to Halliday, Stevens and McIntosh (1973: 209 – 11) linguistics is concerned with patterns of relationship between events, which are pieces of socially determined human activity; hence the link is with the social sciences, psychology, sociology and social anthropology. The patterning of these events is as we see, both internal and external. The internal one is what is known as “linguistic form”; the study of the forms of language follows the general principles governing the study of systematically

related properties and events. The external patterning is called “context”: it is the patterned relation between linguistic events and non-linguistic phenomena.

Linguistic sciences (according to these three authors) are not unique in the way they use theory. However, they are unique in what theory they use and in what they use it for.

The study of language as a phenomenon of the individual was part of general psychology; the descriptive categories used to account for the individual’s – linguistic behaviour were those used to account for his “other non-linguistic” behaviour –thus such terms as learning, memory, skill, perception were as applicable to language as to other behaviour. (Corder, 1973/5: 81). The study of language as a social phenomenon, as part of general sociology made use of descriptive categories such as social-structure, culture, status, role, (which were used in general descriptions of human society) to account for language. What distinguished the “linguistic” study of language (according to Corder) was its autonomy or independence of other disciplines: the linguistic study of language confines itself to a study of the verbal utterances of human beings (op. Cit.: 85); in order to illustrate his point Corder quotes Chomsky’s claim that “the objectives of the linguistic study have always implicitly been the characterization of the internalized code or set of rules used by speaker-hearer when he uses his language” (op. Cit.: 90). Learning a language is plenty more than learning to produce acceptable utterances, these also have to be linguistically appropriate.

The neighbourhood of linguistics has been particularly fertile for important new fields to have emerged and developed: psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics. The first two names are self-explanatory to a point, whereas the third one is either “obscure or misleading, as it involves more than the application of theory, in addition to other disciplines than linguistics being centrally concerned” (Stevens, 1977/8: 37-40). This author defines the intellectual and practical bases employed by applied linguistics framed as a set of five propositions: 1) Applied Linguistics has a basis in

theory and principle; 2) Those bases are multiple; 3) Applied Linguistics re-defines itself afresh for each task; 4) Applied Linguistics is not restricted to an interest in the learning and teaching of languages.

In relation to the learning and teaching of languages, it defines itself as having three main components: a) the underlying disciplines, b) teaching techniques and c) aids and equipment.

Linguistics is usually defined as the scientific study of language (Lyons, 1981/6: 6-34): General linguistics studies language in general and Descriptive linguistics describes particular language. As soon as the first distinction is drawn, another branch of the discipline is acknowledged: historical linguistics, which traces the development of the language describing it diachronically. A non-historical account of a language as it is at some precise point of time, will describe the language in a synchronic way.

Lyons refers to the distinction between theoretical and applied linguistics as a “third dichotomy”. It can be said that the “label” of theoretical linguistics implies, that this part of the science studies language and languages in order to construct a theory of their structure and functions, without regard to any practical application. Conversely, applied linguistics is concerned with the application of the findings of linguistics to practical tasks which include language-teaching.

Applied linguistics draws on both the general and the descriptive branches of linguistics is empirical (and objective): it operates with publicly verifiable data obtained by means of observation or experiment. On the other hand language is something people tend to take for granted as it is something with which we are familiar since childhood. It is said that this familiarity stands in the way of its objective examination.

Introductions to linguistics usually draw a sharp demarcation between traditional grammar and modern linguistics (opposing the scientific status of the latter to the non-scientific status of the former). Linguistics, like any other discipline, builds on the past, challenging, refuting, developing and reformulating traditional doctrines. Linguistics creates its own “jargon” out of necessity because the everyday

terms used with references to language are imprecise or ambiguous.

The relations between linguistics and languages teaching have been described as “dual”: “applications and implications” (Stern, 1983/4: 174 APUD Spolsky, 1970); namely the description of language provided by linguists can be applied through grammar, textbooks and dictionaries. Also linguistic discussions about the nature of language provide new insights which in turn have implications for the teaching of languages. This view has been supported by Corder (1973^a, 15) who summed it up by stating that “there can be no systematic improvement in language teaching without reference to the knowledge about language which linguistics gives us”.

Stern concludes referring to the need for “educational linguists” who have expertise both in theoretical linguistics (TL) and language pedagogy (LP). It seems that the demands of linguistics on the one hand and of language teaching on the other, make it necessary the notion of a “mediator” or rather a “mediating stage” between TL and LP. (See Appendix 1). The continuing interaction and developments in both linguistic theory and language pedagogy clearly justify the existence of a mediating discipline, such as “educational linguistics”.

It can be said that the study of linguistics as such represents a scientific way to learn about

languages and language. Because of the existence of “Applied Linguistics” which appears to comprise the study of subjects such as Psycholinguistics, Sociolinguistics, the Theory and Practice of Language Teaching, etc., we (the language teachers or teacher trainers) are provided with the means to get acquainted with the research that has been done in the field. In addition to this, as a result of being directly involved in actual language teaching practice, we are able to supply valuable information concerning the learners, their individual differences and their learning needs.

The term “Applied Linguistics” and its meaning seem to be rather close to the mentioned notion of “mediating stage” between Theoretical Linguistics and Language Pedagogy. Thus, the study of linguistics as such provides the practising language teacher with the necessary knowledge and tools to pursue continual improvement in his teaching practice. Language teachers find the means to evaluate their own rate of achievement, together with that of their students through the data supplied by the various linguistic fields of study and research.

Teachers have more ample view and deeper insights of the learning situation by using their linguistic knowledge in order to be able to perform both as instructors and observant-participant investigators.

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