

On the Relationships Between Linguistics and Language Teaching

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Abstract

This paper attempts to make a discussion of the relationships between linguistics and language teaching, especially second language teaching. Although there are still many differences between linguistics and language teaching in their attitudes towards language, their goals, and their methods, they are both independent of and interacting with each other.

Key words: Linguistics; Language Teaching; Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Many language teachers and learners tend to ask this question: Why should we teach or learn linguistics? Since linguistics is defined as the scientific study of language, it seems obvious that such a study would help a lot in language teaching. Language teaching decisions have to be made at different levels—defining the goal of learning, determining the broad methodological approach, assessing the value of particular techniques, organizing the language content and few of these can be soundly made without a deep understanding of language. We have various sorts of ways in which linguistics may help the language teacher to make more informed decisions. Although there are still many differences between linguistics and language

teaching in their attitudes towards language, their goals, and their methods, the interaction and mutually benefited development between linguistics and language teaching definitely should not be overlooked.

1. INTERACTION

For all the differences between linguistics and language teaching, they are in many ways interacting with each other.

1.1 Various Linguistic Views and Their Significance in Language Teaching

Many language learning theories are proposed on the basis of certain linguistic theories. As a matter of fact, knowledge in linguistics lies at the root of understanding what language learners can learn how they actually learn and what they learn ultimately.

1.1.1 Traditional Grammar

A traditional grammar is a pre-20th century language description based on earlier grammars of Greek or Latin. As a product of the pre-linguistic era, it lays emphasis on correctness, literary excellence, the use of Latin models, and the priority of the written language.

In language teaching, textbooks based on traditional grammars take prominent writers of the previous centuries as language models. They favor the past “purest” language form; they prefer the written language to spoken language; they concentrate on detailed points instead of the construction of the whole text. The traditional approach to language teaching involves the presentation of numerous definitions, rules and explanations, and it adopts a teacher-centered grammar-translation method, i.e., the main teaching and learning activities are grammar and translation study. Many modern linguists, however, argue that one should teach the language, not teach about the language. In communication, one should learn first to “speak” the language, not to “read” the language.

1.1.2 Structuralism Linguistics

Structuralism linguistics describes linguistic features in terms of systems or structures. Dissatisfied with traditional grammars, structuralism grammar set out to describe the current spoken language which people use in communication. For the first time, structuralism grammar provides description of phonological systems that aids the systematic teaching of pronunciation. However, like traditional grammars, the focus of structuralism grammar is still on the grammatical structures of a language. Structuralism teaching materials are arranged on a basis of underlying grammatical patterns and structures, and ordered in a way supposed to be suitable for teaching. Structuralism linguists are influenced by the behavioristic view that one learns a language by building up habits on the basis of stimulus-response chains. In teaching method this implies a pattern drill technique that aims at the learner's automatism for language forms.

1.1.3 Transformational-Generative Linguistics

Proposed by Chomsky, Transformational-Generative grammar (TG grammar) sees language as a system of innate rules. In Chomsky's view, a native speaker possesses a kind of linguistic competence. The child is born with knowledge of some linguistic universals. While acquiring his mother tongue, he compares his innate language system with that of his native language and modifies his grammar. Therefore, language learning becomes an activity of building and testing hypotheses instead of habit formation. As for the construct of a sentence, TG grammar describes it as composed of a deep structure, a surface structure, and some transformational rules.

Although Chomsky does intend to make his model a representation of performance, that is, the way language is actually used in communication, some applied linguists find that TG grammar offers useful ideas for language teaching. In designing teaching materials, for instance, sentence patterns with the same deep structure can be closely related, such as the active and the passive. Transformational rules may assist the teacher in the teaching of complex sentence construction. In the teaching of literature, TG grammar provides a new instrument for stylistic analysis. For example, a writer's style can be identified according to certain kinds of transformation which frequently appear in his writing, such as nominalization, verbalization, adjectivization, and passivation (Ohmann, 1964). Nevertheless, despite the various attempts to apply TG grammar to language teaching, the influence of such a formal and abstract grammar remains limited in the field of language education as Chomsky himself openly claimed that language teaching and learning is not his concern.

1.1.4 Functional Linguistics

Taking a semantic-sociolinguistic approach, Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics sees language as an

instrument used to perform various functions in social interaction. Halliday writes a number of works in which he examines the development of language functions in the child and the functions language has in society.

For Halliday, learning language is learning to mean. In order to be able to mean, one has to master a set of language functions that have direct relation to sentence forms. In the child language, there are seven initial forms. In the adult language, however, these discrete functions are replaced by three meta-functions: the ideational function, the interpersonal function, and the textual function.

Since systemic-functional linguistics sees the formal system of language as a realization of functions of language in use, its scope is broader than that of formal linguistic theories. In the field of language teaching, it leads to the development of notion/function-based syllabuses, which have attracted increasing attention.

1.1.5 The Theory of Communicative Competence

The concept of competence originally comes from Chomsky. It refers to the grammatical knowledge of the ideal language user and has nothing to do with the actual use of language in concrete situations. This concept of linguistic competence has been criticized for being too narrow and presenting a "Garden of Eden View". To expand the concept of competence, D.H. Hymes (1971) proposes communicative competence, which has four components: possibility—the ability to produce grammatical sentences; feasibility—the ability to produce sentences which can be decoded by the human brain; appropriateness—the ability to use correct forms of language in a specific socio-cultural context; performance—the fact that the utterance is completed.

In Hymes' view, the learner acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical but also as appropriate. The aim of language learning is the ability to perform a repertoire of speech acts so as to take part in speech events. This is another way of saying that learning language is learning to perform certain functions. Like Halliday's functional grammar, Hymes' theory also leads to notion/function-based syllabuses, and a step further, communicative syllabuses.

The theory of communicative competence stresses the context in which an utterance occurs. In its application, the teacher may teach how in different situations the same sentence can perform the function of statement, command, or request. On the other hand, while introducing different linguistic forms with the same semantic structure. Take the two forms of "you" in Chinese as an example. The teacher may draw special attention to different contexts in which they are used. The conceptual approach also leads to a concentration on discourse, in Hymes' term linguistic routines—the sequential organization beyond sentences. Thus in the teaching of literature, the teacher can focus on features of different genres. In the teaching of conversation, he can introduce such strategies as

opening, continuing, turn-taking and closing. To present teaching contents of this kind, a learner-centered teaching methodology is necessary.

1.2 The Influence of Language Teaching on Linguistics

language teaching has its feedback to linguistics and promotes the development of linguistics to some extent. In the 1970s, faced with the great ideological rifts between structuralism and transformational-generative grammar, many language teachers and observers began to question the role of linguistics in language pedagogy. In this situation, many educational linguists and teaching methodologists were aware of the fact that the demands of language teaching may run ahead of linguistic theories. They believed that practical needs might stimulate the development of new linguistic theories. With these ideas in mind, they no longer waited for the pronouncement of theoretical linguistics; instead, they used their own judgments and initiative in giving language teaching the linguistic directions that they considered necessary. In a certain sense, language teaching to some extent puts linguistic theories forward. Linguistics and language teaching are interacting with each other, but this does not mean that they are like acting force and reacting force in physics. Their mutual effects upon each other are not of equal. Rather, the effects of linguistics upon language teaching are much heavier.

1.3 Implications

Every day in his/her classroom work, a language teacher makes dozens of decisions about his methods and techniques, some prepared, some off the cuff. Many decisions have been made for him by the people who have produced the teaching materials that he employed. The decisions about teaching are all aimed at improving the learning process. Whether one is conscious of it or not, every one of these decisions in teaching is implicit in it a view on learning—either on the general principles that govern language learning or on the way that learning is proceeding in that particular situation. Let us suppose that a new word or collocation is required of acquiring. There is a multitude of options open to the teacher. To teach the meaning of this item, he/she may translate it: this implies a belief that learning a foreign language is learning to map it on the mother tongue, or that eventual use is aided by the mediation of the first language. Alternatively, he/she may present the item together with one or more visual images: this suggests that meaning is simply the product of recurring associations. He/she may exemplify in numerous sentences: this hints that learning is an inductive process. He may explain the item: this implies that learning is the application of cognitive skills. Having presented the meaning of the item in one or other of these ways, he /she may do no more: this suggests language learning does not require productive participation of the learner. He/she may ask for repetition

of the word: this implies the active production of the item is necessary to learning. He/she may ask the pupil to select an appropriate item from a number of alternatives offered: this hints that learning a language is learning to exercise choices, and that contrasting items enables them to be learned more effectively than just repeating them in appropriate contexts.

As this example suggests, relations of implication exist most obvious between language teaching and what is known as the psychology of language acquisition. In any real situation, implications like those above are not the only one that operates. Our theories of the psychology of language learning have implicational relations with language teaching largely due to the fact that they are as yet very crude theories. It is unavoidable considering the newness of psychology as a science and the difficulty of inquiring into human behavior. Language teaching aims at being practically effective, not theoretically consistent. The study of linguistics and especially theories of language acquisition helps to articulate the implications of many current and proposed practices in language teaching.

Yes, there are many cases where notions and information drawn from linguistics act directly upon the process of language teaching. Most language teachers who studies linguistics expect to derive applications from it. The product of a linguist's work has its most obvious application through the description of languages that he/she makes. Language descriptions provide the input to the construction of teaching materials. In this respect, linguistics is no different from traditional grammar, which was also used to identify units of language learning. What a teacher expects is that linguistics will offer him quite new and very different descriptions of language that he teaches. He/She also anticipate that linguistics descriptions, through looking into the hitherto uninvestigated area of language, will extend the range of his knowledge of the language.

There are many notions which linguists use and which enrich our understanding of language, for instance, langue/parole, linguistic competence and linguistic performance. For linguists, everything in language is inter-related and mutually defining. We have noticed how misleading it can be to think of grammar as a number of distinct and separate grammatical forms, when virtually every item enters into a variety of structural relationships and carry a number of semantic features. We have seen too that a structure of a sentence is not always it appears to be. Sentences that are apparently identical in their formation may have different meanings because the relationships between the elements in the sentences are not in fact the same. There might be nothing to mark the difference and it causes the linguists to say that the surface structure of the sentence is the same, even though the deep structures are different. If language teaching materials are organized on grammatical level, an awareness of possible difference and similarities can be beneficial and valuable.

Sometimes the insights provided by linguists are not really novel. There are times when important notions remain unexpressed or are taken for granted; as a result, they come to be overlooked altogether. Then it is worthless having someone to say the obvious. The centrality of grammatical structure in language teaching is a case in point.

2. DIFFERENCES

2.1 Difference in Their Attitudes Toward Language

In linguistics language is viewed as a system of forms. Linguistics hold that language is unique to human beings, for it has certain design features like arbitrariness, duality, creativity and displacement, and no animal communication system can be so complex and advanced. Linguistics also studies the origin of language and its functions. Linguists talk about the functions of language in an abstract sense. It is generally held that linguistics has the following functions: informative, interpersonal function, per formative, emotive function, phatic communion, recreational function and metalingual function. In addition, linguistics has many branches, such as phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax semantics and pragmatics. We also have some branches of macro linguistics like psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics that show an interdisciplinary nature.

By contrast, language is regarded as a set of skills in the field of language teaching, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Translating and interpreting are two skills based on the above mentioned four skills.

2.2 Difference in Their Goals

Linguistic research is concerned with the establishment of theories that explain the phenomena of language. As a science, linguistics now has a set of established theories, some of which we have come to in our linguistics courses. The aim of language teaching, however, is the learner's mastery of language.

2.3 Other Differences

As an applied discipline, language teaching is independent. It has its objective of effective language teaching, and it also has its own characteristics and laws of development. Besides linguistics, language pedagogy has other disciplines as its theoretical basis, such as psychology, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, anthropology, and pedagogies.

Moreover, the interaction between linguistics and language teaching does not mean that each linguistic theory has its applications to language teaching. After all, linguistics is mainly concerned with the development of language theories and the creation of concepts for the description of natural languages in general. In recent

years, pragmatics, functional grammar and discourse analysis are quite popular in the linguistic field. They are mainly concerned with language use and functions, which is in accordance with the final goal of our English teaching. However, although researchers also claim that these theories contribute a lot to language teaching, yet it seems that, at least in China, most researchers are more interested in these theories proper and are going farther and farther away from language teaching. Even in some cases, a simple question, which can be easily understood by a middle school student, becomes quite complex. In this situation, it is hard to say that these theories have their applications to language pedagogy, and even their implications for language teaching are more and more obscure and suspicious.

3. APPLIED LINGUISTICS: AN INTERMEDIARY

To bridge the gap between the theories of linguistics and the practice of language teaching, applied linguistics serves as a mediating area that interprets the results of linguistic theories and makes them user-friendly to the language teacher and learner.

Applied linguistics is conducive to language teaching in two major aspects:

In the first place, applied linguistics extends theoretical linguistics in the direction of language learning and teaching, so that the teacher is enabled to make better decisions on the goal and content of the teaching. When faced with the task of designing a syllabus, the teacher has a number of choices concerning language materials, principles of compiling or choosing textbooks and exercises. In this case, the teacher is consciously or unconsciously using his understanding of the nature of learning. Applied linguistics provides the teacher with a formal knowledge of the nature of language and language system, and thus increases his understanding of the nature of language learning. As a result, the teacher can make more informed decisions on what approach to take, hence what to teach.

Secondly, applied linguistics states the insights and implications that linguistic theories have on the language teaching methodology. Once the goal and content of the teaching are settled, the teacher has to consider questions of how to teach. Should the teaching-learning process be teacher-centered, textbook-centered, or learner-centered? How should the learner's errors be treated? What techniques should be adopted in the classroom? Since applied linguistics defines the nature of language learning in connection with various linguistic theories, it helps the teacher to choose teaching methods and techniques.

CONCLUSION

In summary, linguistics and language teaching are two independent fields which are also interacting with each other in many respects. Various linguistic views like TG grammar and functional linguistics have exerted much influence upon language teaching. Besides, language teaching can be used to test the validity of and provide certain feedbacks to linguistic theories. However, not every linguistic theory has its application to language teaching. Linguistics is only one theoretical basis for language teaching whose other theoretical bases also include psychology, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, and so on. Anyway, efforts should still be made on both parts to promote the development of each other.

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