II Discourse Analysis, Interpretative Procedures and Communicative Language Teaching

One of the issues that has preoccupied a number of linguists over recent years is the extent to which the communicative functioning of language can be accounted for within the framework of formal models of linguistic description. Essentially this issue has to do with how criteria for adequacy should be defined and it raises questions about the goals of linguistic theory. In the early days of transformational-generative grammar, adequacy was defined in terms of the degree to which a linguistic description accounted for the speaker's knowledge of syntactic structure. In Chomsky (1957) we are presented with a model of description which focuses almost exlusively on that level of language which mediates between sounds and meanings with little indication of how this mediation is effected: phonology is dealt with only briefly and semantics is not dealt with at all. In this respect the model can be said to be inadequate. Later developments in generative grammar, when the notion of adequacy is given explicit recognition, can be seen as attempts to extend its criteria by requiring of linguistic descriptions that they should also account for the speaker's knowledge of the relationship between syntax and sound on the one hand and between syntax and meaning on the other. Thus a narrow definition of grammar in Chomsky (1957), which effectively equates it with syntax, gives way to a very broad definition in Chomsky (1965), which incorporates both phonology and semantics. To the extent that it thereby includes matter which we would normally think of as part of a speaker's knowledge of his language the goals would seem to be more adequate. But there are methodological difficulties. Once one widens the scope of grammatical statement in this way, it is difficult to prevent it from widening further. Where, for example, does semantics give way to pragmatics? Phonology and semantics merge with syntax but on their other boundaries they also merge with the 'real world', with utterances produced by social beings in actual contexts of situation. How much of the 'real world', of the actual business of communication, must a linguistic description aim at accounting for in order to be judged as adequate?

It has now become fashionable to point out that Chomsky's definition of competence, which is the object of grammatical description and so a measure of its scope, is too restrictive in that it leaves out of consideration the speaker's communicative competence, his ability to produce and perceive illocutionary acts as elements in discourse development, to realize presupposition and information focus in propositions, and so on. But is it possible to extend the range of grammar so that it accounts for this kind of competence to any satisfactory degree of explicitness? Is it reasonable to

require that it should be adequate to this kind of task? Over the past few years all kinds of people — linguists, sociolinguists, sociologists and philosophers — have been making all kinds of insightful observations about the communicative operation of language and inciting us to rebel against too strict a preoccupation with sentence structure. But what is the status of these observations and how can they be ordered into a coherent scheme? This is a question of relevance to linguistic theory. And how can we bring the insights these observations offer to bear on language teaching problems? This is a question of relevance to applied linguistics and the pedagogy of language teaching. In brief, there are all manner of suggestions being bruited abroad at the moment which involve the reconsideration of linguistic structure and communicative effect beyond the sentence. What validity do they have in linguistics and, what is more to the point for our particular purposes, what utility do they have in language teaching?

A number of papers given at Neuchâtel take up these questions. They attempt to make precise some of the insights that have emerged from a communicative orientation to linguistic description with a view to assessing their significance for language teaching. It is convenient to distinguish three inter-related themes running through these discussions. The first might be labelled *discourse analysis:* here the focus of attention is on what is involved in the description of discourse from the analyst's point of view. The second theme might be labelled *communicative competence:* here the focus of attention is on the description of discourse from the point of view of the participant, on the interpretative procedures he employs in making sense of language in contexts of use. The third theme can be called *communicative language teaching* and here the main concern is with the consideration of discourse and the language user's ability to process it in relation to the needs of the language learner.

The first problem in any discussion of discourse analysis is to distinguish the different kinds of descriptive activity that are carried out under this name. It is clear, for example, that the work of Harris on the discovery of formal connections between sentences without regard to meaning (Harris 1952) is very different from the work of Labov on the discovery of how utterances are related in terms of the underlying communicative acts which they realize, where considerations of meaning are paramount (Labov 1970). Yet both of them say that what they are doing is discourse analysis. They are both concerned with how language is organized beyond the sentence, but whereas Harris thinks of this organization in terms of the way linguistic elements are formally *manifested,* Labov thinks of it in terms of the way they are functionally *realized* in communicative interaction. In view of this difference, it is proposed in Widdowson (1973) that it would be sensible to

57

make a terminological distinction and to restrict the term 'discourse analysis' to refer to enquiries of a Labovian kind, and to call the study of the formal properties of sentences in combination 'text analysis'. Thus we might say that if one investigates the formal properties of an instance of language then one is treating it as text and if one investigates its communicative properties one is treating it as discourse. Harris and Labov are interested in how sentences (Harris) and utterances (Labov) are combined in the sequencing of elements which results in textual cohesion on the one hand and in discourse coherence on the other. But text can also be studied without regard to the way it is structured, as when it is analysed to discover the relative frequency of occurrence of particular linguistic elements, as in (some kinds of) register analysis. And discourse can also be analysed non-structurally, as it is in (some kinds of) content analysis.

Although the text/discourse distinction would seem to be a useful one to make in that it clarifies matters from a language teaching point of view (to which I shall return directly), it raises certain rather troublesome questions with regard to linguistic description. In particular the question arises as to how far cohesion and coherence can be treated as the same phenomenon and accounted for by a systematic extension of grammar. This matter is touched upon in Widdowson but explored in much more detail in Krzeszowski's paper (1973). He restates the distinction that has been made here by saying that discourse has to do with the association of sentences with extralinguistic settings and text with the association of sentences with linguistic settings. He points out that the former is not susceptible to formalization in terms of grammatical rules:

". . . people's verbal reactions to extra-linguistic phenomena can only be predicted on *probabilistic* grounds, which excludes the possibility of codifying these reactions in the form of rules which could constitute a grammar where the number of available choices would be finite: any extra-linguistic situation may be associated with an infinite number of linguistic expressions, which constitute a hierarchy of probabilities but nothing more."

This in effect rules out the possibility of discourse grammars which would account for coherence. Krzeszowski then goes on to examine whether it is possible or necessary to construct text grammars which would account for cohesion.

There are two features of textual cohesion in particular which would appear to require an extension of the scope of grammar to cover macro-structures beyond the sentence. The first has to do with propositional linkage, with the kind of overt referential relationships which are mediated across sentences by anaphoric pronouns and such like (the kind of

relationships discussed in detail in Hasan (1968)). The second has to do with implicational linkage, with the kind of covert relationships of entailment and presupposition which hold between statements expressed through different sentences. Krzeszowski demonstrates that most of these relationships can be dealt with in terms of co-ordination and sub-ordination, which is within the scope of a sentence grammar, so that the kind of macro-structures postulated in, for example, Van Dijk (1972) to justify the construction of text grammars, are not necessary. The only relationship which would appear to necessitate the consideration of macro-structures is that which is signalled by 'sentence connectives' like *consequently* (expressing the presupposition that S_1 implies S_2), *however* (expressing the presupposition that S_2 contradicts S_1) and *moreover* (expressing the presupposition that S_1 is similar to S_2). But although the non-occurrence of these connectives in sentences points to the need to set up a text grammar, Krzeszowski argues that the conditions which determine whether a sequence of sentences linked by such connectives is well-formed or not are extra-linguistic. Thus any two sentences taken at random can be related by means of any of these connectives to constitute an appropriate discourse given certain extra-linguistic circumstances, and Krzeszowski takes two random sentences and illustrates this quite convincingly. So what Krzeszowski suggests is that it is not necessary to devise text grammars to account for cohesion since this can be dealt with in sentence grammars, and it is not possible to devise text grammars to account for coherence since this is a feature of discourse and not subject to linguistic formalization.

It would seem to follow from these observations that the ability to produce and perceive coherent discourse is an aspect of communicative competence that cannot easily be described by means of linguistic rules. Indeed, it may be that the very concept of rule is an inadequate one to account for actual communicative activity. We speak of linguistic behaviour as rule-governed, but it is clearly not governed in any very strict sense. We do not develop a discourse simply by applying rules. We use rules as a kind of reference in order to make sense of data. In this respect what we do is *ex tempore,* an improvisation. Two of the Neuchâtel papers under review (Corder (1975) and Widdowson (1975)) explore the consequence of adopting this kind of attitude and consider how far discourse can be described from the participants' point of view in terms of the kind of interpretative procedures discussed by the ethnomethodologists (See Turner 1974, Cicourel 1973).

The ethnomethodologists represent discourse not as a manifestation of pre-ordained meanings as codified in a linguistic description but as a dynamic realization process of what Garfinkel calls 'practical reasoning' (Garfinkel

1967). In this view, discourse is created as a 'contingent ongoing accomplishment' whereby participants in an interchange attribute particular values to linguistic elements as they are conditioned by the linguistic context and the extra-linguistic situation in which they occur. The ethnomethodologists have been principally concerned with spoken discourse but the interpretation of written discourse must presumably depend on the same kind of interpretative procedure. In Widdowson (1975) it is suggested that this view of what constitutes communicative competence is of particular relevance to the problem of how the language user interprets instances of discourse which are deviant in respect to grammatical rules, such as are found, for example, in poetry. Poetic discourse has been something of an embarrassment to generative linguists (see, for example, Katz 1964, Levin 1962, Thorne 1965) since it frequently exhibits structures which, though interpretable, cannot be generated by a grammar, even though the grammar purports to represent the knowledge which underlies the language user's interpretative ability. Here interpretation clearly is not a direct consequence of the application of linguistic rules. The suggestion in Widdowson's paper is that the procedures which enable speakers to interpret poetry are of the same kind which enable them to interpret other kinds of discourse (and if this were not so, there would be no way of explaining how poetry is interpreted at all) but that in the case of poetry these procedures are made more apparent.

In Corder's paper, the ability to interpret discourse is represented as a special case of the more general capacity we have for making sense of our environment. Drawing on observations in Gregory (1970) he points out that visual perception, for example, is an active process which involves making predictions on the basis of a stock of 'object hypotheses'. These constitute the knowledge we bring to a particular situation and which we match against sensory data in order to make sense of it. He argues that this procedure is comparable with that whereby we match linguistic knowledge against actual language data in order to interpret it as discourse. And he makes the important point that the resulting interpretation is judged not as correct or incorrect but as adequate or inadequate for what we need it for:

"An adequate interpretation of discourse or of our visual environment is one which is practically useful or successful, in that it permits effective action, but it is only the need for action which either forces us to abandon or permits us to maintain our hypothesis. Our interpretation of the visual world, as of discourse, may be inadequate or adequate for our immediate need but it can never be *right*."

If this is so, then the act of interpretation is not only a matter of applying procedures which match rules with data, but of applying procedures also which regulate the relative importance of particular rules so that we are able

to focus attention on certain aspects of discourse and reduce others to peripheral status. That is to say, the structure of discourse is not given, not indeed discoverable, as an objective fact, but is imposed upon data in the very act of interpretation. This is why the structural patterns which discourse analysis yields cannot be equated with the developmental patterns of interpretation which are created by the language user's communicative competence.

Let us now turn to the third theme which runs through these papers and consider what implications the points that have been discussed have for the teaching of language. In general, they lead us to reconsider a number of well-established pedagogic assumptions. To begin with, if some of the communicative activities involved in the production and perception of discourse cannot be accounted for by linguistic rules, then it would seem that the acquisition of communicative competence, which is presumably what all language teaching aims to achieve, is not a necessary consequence of following courses designed to teach linguistic rules, whether this is done overtly or not.

The development of communicative competence in a language would seem to involve the acquisition of interpretative procedures whereby a knowledge of linguistic code is actively engaged with non-linguistic knowledge and experience. This competence is part of a more general capacity for making sense of our environment. But the learner of a foreign language has already acquired this competence in his mother tongue and it would therefore seem reasonable to exploit this when we come to teach him another language. We have been reluctant to do this in the past. The foreign language has, on the contrary, been represented as something quite new and entirely detached from the learner's experience, and of course if one represents the language as consisting solely of a collection of linguistic items, then it *is* quite new. But the interpretative procedures which we want our learner to associate with these linguistic items are already a part of his competence. The crucial problem is to get him to realize this competence through an alternative means of expression. One of the ways of doing this might be to follow the lead of other methodologies and make a direct appeal to what the learner already knows. Instead of enjoining him not to associate what he is learning with his own language, for example, we might on the contrary encourage him to do so. One of the papers under review (Widdowson 1974) makes just this proposal. It points out that the objections to translation as a teaching device are only valid if this involves a direct correlation of surface forms in the L1 and the L2. But once one adopts a communicative perspective and represents sentences as expressions of propositions on the one hand and communicative acts on the other, then the way is open to developing an awareness in the learner of how the language he is learning operates as a means of

communication in the same way as does his own language. The technique is particularly effective, it is suggested, when the common propositions and communicative acts derive from a relatively well-defined universe of discourse which is of its nature culturally neutral. What might roughly be called 'scientific discourse', for example, is the expression of concepts and methods of enquiry and exposition which remain the same whatever the actual linguistic means of expression might be. These can be said to represent the elements of the deep structure of scientific discourse. This is made overt by non-verbal modes of communication like formulae, graphs, diagrams and so on, and these might serve as underlying representations to which the different realizations in the L1 and the L2 can make reference.

The same view that the learner might profitably be made aware of his own interpretative strategies lies behind the suggestion in the paper already referred to (Widdowson 1975) that poetry might be reinstated in the language syllabus. If it is the case that we interpret poetry by making use of the same procedures that we use in interpreting any discourse but that we do so more consciously because more work has to be done to make sense of it, then there appears to be a case for introducing poetry (with due discretion) in order to development an awareness in the learner of such procedures.

This theme — the desirability of making the learner aware of what he is doing — recurs in Candlin's paper (1975). He points out that the analysis of language variation as 'registers' by correlating linguistic forms with situational factors provides the learner with little guidance as to how forms and factors inter-relate in dynamic fashion and so gives them no help in handling the language communicatively. As he puts it:

"Just as with hindsight there was no great reason to suppose that courses intent on inculcating formal rules of grammar (by whatever methodology) would assist the fluent verbal ability of the learner, neither ought we to suppose that registerial analysis in correlative terms will improve communicative strategies of the learner engaged in steering his way through a discourse to achieve an original or discovered goal."

Candlin argues that the learner needs to acquire 'metalinguistic knowledge' of the language he is learning. By this he means 'knowledge by the learner of the nature of language and the nature of 'knowing a language', and additionally of the set of terms by which the components of such knowledge can be characterized.' He discusses work on the development of communicative skills in the universities of Birmingham and Lancaster which encourages learners to actively participate in metalinguistic discussion about what goes on in effective language interaction. He comments:

"Students in such a methodology are encouraged to gloss, to comment on the interpretation of utterances, so that they move progressively towards that

'common-sense' on which native-speakers draw, and come to be aware of the necessary preconditions for the understanding of utterance-values."

The papers that have been reviewed here take up certain issues in discourse analysis and the characterization of communicative competence and seek to draw from them insights that might be relevant to language teaching methodology. Although the suggestions they make are necessarily, and appropriately, speculative, they perhaps indicate a need for us to look again at some of the assumptions underlying a good deal of current language teaching methodology. What emerges in all of these papers is a concept of language as a creative communicative process, an activity which fully engages the user's knowledge and experience and brings these to bear on the act of interpretation. From this concept we can adduce the pedagogic principle of what we might call cognitive integration. Again, these papers stress the importance of bringing the learner to an awareness of his own interpretative procedures, of his own active participation in discourse development. From this we might adduce the pedagogic principle of what we might call rational appeal. Neither of these principles is much in evidence in an approach to language teaching which lays emphasis on pattern practice and habit formation and which represents a foreign language as something detached from the learner's own experience. Both of them suggest the pedagogic value of poetry and translation and the desirability of teaching the learner metalinguistic knowledge of the language he is learning.

The points raised in these papers suggest that it is perhaps time for a re-appraisal of assumptions which we have tended to accept as self-evident. This does not imply that they are necessarily mistaken, but only that if we believe them to be valid we should be able to justify our belief in some principled way. A growing interest in the communicative functioning of language has led to a review of the criteria for adequacy in linguistic description. It might also lead us to review the criteria for adequacy in language teaching.

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