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The Role of Linguistics in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

Fundamentally, the field of linguistics is concerned with the nature of language and communication. It is obvious that people have been fascinated with language and communication for thousands of years, yet in many ways we are only beginning to understand the complex nature of this aspect of human life. Linguistics, the scientific study of human natural language, is a growing and exciting area of study, with an important impact on fields as diverse as education, language teaching, anthropology, sociology, cognitive psychology, philosophy, computer science, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence, among others. In spite of the importance of the field of linguistics, many people, even highly educated people, tell us that they have only a vague idea of what the field of linguistics is about. Some people believe that a linguist is a person who speaks several languages fluently. Others believe that linguists are language experts who can help you decide whether it is better to say "It is I" or "It's me." Yet it is quite possible to be a professional linguist without having taught a single language class and without speaking any more than one language.

Key Words: linguistics, ELT

What is linguistics, then? If we ask, what is the nature of language? Or how does communication work? We quickly realize that these questions have no simple answers and are much too broad to be answered in a direct way. Similarly, questions such as what is energy? Or what is matter? Cannot be answered in a simple manner, and indeed the entire field of physics is an attempt to answer them. Linguistics is no different: the field as a whole represents an attempt to break down the broad questions about the nature of

language and communication into smaller, more manageable questions that we can hope to answer, and in so doing establish reasonable result that we can build on in moving closer to answers to the larger questions, unless we limit our sights in this way and restrict ourselves to particular frameworks for examining different aspects of language and communication, we cannot go ahead in answering the broad questions that have fascinated people for so long. The field of linguistics is vast and includes the study

of the structural components of language. *Morphology* is concerned with the properties of words and word-building rules. *Phonetics and phonemic Transcription* introduces the physiology involved in the production of speech sounds as well as phonemic and phonetic transcription system that are used to represent the sounds of English. *Syntax* presents a study of the structure of sentences and phrases. *Semantics* surveys the properties of meaning and denotation. *Language Variation* deals with the ways speakers and groups of speakers can differ from each other in terms of the various forms of language that they use. *Language Change* examines how languages change over time and how languages can be historically related.

To turn now from the particular to the general, what are some of the background assumptions that linguists make when we study language? Perhaps the most important fundamental assumption is that human language at all levels is rule or principle governed. Every known language has systematic rules governing pronunciation, word formation, and grammatical construction. Further, the way in which meanings are associated with phrases of a language is characterized by regular rules. Finally, the use of language to communicate is governed by important generalizations that can be expressed in rules. At this point we must add an important

qualification to what we have just said. That is, we are using the terms rule and rule-governed in the special way that linguists use them. This usage is very different from the layman's understanding of the terms. In school most of us were taught so-called rules of grammar, which we were told to follow in order to speak and write "correctly" - rules such as "Do not end a sentence with a preposition," or "Don't say 'ain't,'" or "Never split an infinitive." Rules of this type are called prescriptive rules. They prescribe or dictate to the speaker, the way the language supposedly should be written or spoken in order for the speaker to appear correct or educated. Prescriptive rules are really rules of style rather than rules of grammar.

In sharp contrast, when linguists speak of rules, they do not refer to prescriptive rules from grammar books. Rather, linguists try to formulate descriptive rules from grammar books. Rather, linguists try to formulate descriptive rules when they analyze language, rules that describe the actual language of some group of speakers and not some hypothetical language that speakers should use. Descriptive rules express generalizations and regularities about various aspects of language. Thus, when we say that language is rule-governed, we are really saying that the study of human language has revealed numerous generalizations about and regularities in

the structure and function of language. In spite of the fact that language is governed by strict rules, there is no limit to the kinds of things that can be talked about. How language achieves this property of affability is based on the study of - "Morphology" and "Syntax."

Another important background assumption that linguists make is that the various human languages constitute a unified phenomenon: linguists assume that it is possible to study human language in general and that the study of particular language reveals features of language that are universal. What do we mean by universal features of language? Foreign language courses, after all, deal with specific languages such as French, German or Russian. Further, specific human languages appear on the surface to be so inherent from each other that it is often difficult to understand how linguists can speak of language as though it were a single thing.

Although it is obvious that specific languages differ from each other on the surface, if we look closer we find that human languages surprisingly resemble. For instance, all known languages are at a similar level of complexity and detail - there is no such thing as a primitive human language. All languages provide a means for asking questions, making requests, making assertions, and so on. And there is nothing that can be

expressed in one language that cannot be expressed in any other. Obviously one language may have terms not found in another language, but it is always possible to invent new terms to express what we mean: anything we can imagine or think, we can express in any human language.

Turning to more abstract properties, even the formal structures of language are similar: all languages have sentences made up of smaller phrasal units, these units in turn being made up of words, which are themselves made up to sequences of sounds. All of these features of human language are so obvious to us that we may fail to see how surprising it is that languages share them. When linguists use the term language, or natural human language, they are revealing their belief that at the abstract level, beneath the surface variation, languages remarkably resemble in form and function and conform to certain universal principles. In relation to what we have just said about universal principle, we should observe once again that most of the illustrative examples are drawn from the English language. This should not mislead us into supposing that what we say is relevant only to English. We will be introducing fundamental concept of linguistics, and we believe that these have to be applicable to all languages. Linguistics, perhaps more than any other science, provides an opportunity for the student to participate in the

research process. Finally, we offer a brief observation about the general nature of linguistics. To many linguists the ultimate aim of linguistics is not simply to understand how language itself is structured and how it functions. We hope that as we come to understand more about human language, we will correspondingly understand more about the processes of human thought. In this view the study of language is ultimately the study of the human mind. This goal is perhaps best expressed by Noam Chomsky in his book *Reflections on Language* (1975, 3-4):

Why study language? There are many possible answers, and by focusing on some I do not, of course, mean to disparage others or question their legitimacy. One may, for example, simply be fascinated by the elements of language in themselves and want to discover their order and arrangement, their origin in history or in the individual, or the ways in which they are used in thought, in science or in art, or in normal social interchange. One reason for studying language - and for me personally the most compelling reason - is that it is tempting to regard language, in the traditional phrase, as "a mirror of mind." I do not mean by this simply that the concepts expressed and distinctions developed in normal language use give us insight into the patterns of thought and the world of "common sense" constructed by the human mind. More intriguing, to me at

least, is the possibility that by studying language we may discover abstract principles that govern its structure and use, principles that are universal by biological necessity and not mere historical accident, that derive from mental characteristics of the species. A human language is a system of remarkable complexity. Thus language is a mirror of mind in a deep and significant sense. It is a product of human intelligence, created anew in each individual by operations that lie beyond the reach of will or consciousness.

The scope of applied linguistics

In the early days of linguistics, some linguists made a distinction between micro linguistics and macro linguistics; the former refers to a narrower and the latter to a much broader view of the scope of linguistics. According to the micro linguistic view, languages should be analyzed for their own sake without any reference to their social function, to the human mind and the manner in which languages are acquired by human beings, and to the literary or communicative function of language. Micro linguistics was considered pure or theoretical linguistics not contaminated by social, psychological, pragmatic, and other ordinary considerations. Macro linguistics was the field that was supposed to cover all other aspects of language not included in micro

linguistics. Since linguistics was considered a scientific study of the principles underlying human language and languages, it was supposed to follow the general methodology of science. The application of the concepts and methods used in the scientific study of language i.e. theoretical linguistics to other areas like language teaching and testing, translation and the language of literature was called applied linguistics. Emerging disciplines in the late 1960s and early 1970s like sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics were regarded as related disciplines.

The overall goal of the linguistic science is to understand how human languages work. We must therefore find out whether the arbitrary decisions and actions of linguists in the 1950s and 1960s led to the specified goal and to what consequences. Theory building is a continuous exercise; if a theory provides a general, systematic and explicit reconstruction of the preliminary understanding or knowledge of a specified area, it should also allow the reconstruction of cognitive operations within the field after a study of the relations among the components within the field; such a thing has happened in all areas of knowledge and theory building. The shift towards use oriented approaches to the study of language like reader-response theories in literary criticism, learner-centred pedagogy in education, etc., the formation of the

International Association of Applied linguists (AILA - Association Internationale de linguistique Appliquee) in 1973, the formation of the American Association of Applied linguists (AAAL) in 1977, the formation of (BAAL): The British Association of Applied Linguists in 1967, the work done in the areas of sociolinguistics, psycho linguistics, discourse analysis, etc., the weakening of structuralism, the emergence of post-structuralism and such other factors contributed to a definite reformulation of the difference between pure and 'applied' linguistics.

A glance at the suggested areas in applied linguistics in the agenda of the Seventh World Congress of Applied Linguistics held in 1984 in Brussels clearly shows how different the perception was in the mid 1980s. The Brussels Congress suggested the following areas:

- a. Language problems in Developing Nations: linguistic consequences of colonialism, national language problems, literacy programmes, etc.
- b. Language and Society (sociolinguistics)
- c. Language and Mind (Psycholinguistics)
- d. Language Teaching and Learning (Foreign Language and Mother Tongue)
- e. Communication and Interaction (Discourse analysis, stylistics, translation, lexicography, etc.)
- f. Logico-linguistics (linguistic engineering, quantitative linguistics,

logic and language etc.)

This gives an idea of the scope and field of applied linguistics, today. When Pit Corder's 'Introducing Applied Linguistics' appeared in 1973, the term applied linguistics was taken as being synonymous with language teaching. Peter Stevens, speaking on the occasion of the establishment of AAAL in 1977, pointed out that the British interpretation of applied linguistics can be summarized as a multidisciplinary approach to the solution of language based problems and added: 'from this it follows (a) that the range of interests of applied linguistics, although it includes problems within language learning and language teaching, extends far more widely than those alone, and (b) that the precise mixture of disciplinary sources is redefined for each set of new problems.

Kaplan has argued that 'applied linguistics are the most humanistic of the breed of linguistics' since they are the most directly concerned with the solution of human problems stemming from various uses of language. He adds:

Linguists, on the other hand, are specialists, who solve language problems related to some of the sub-systems of the body language. Because their study is scientific, they are limited to those subsystems which can be made static and which can be isolated from the complex range of variables that affect human behaviour.

What they find is of the greatest use to applied linguists; and the problems that applied linguists discover in their attempts to deal with human problems ought to be the central concern of theoretical linguistics. That has not, unfortunately, been the case; on the contrary, applied linguists have convulsed themselves trying to apply to something every new notion of the theoretical linguist whether that notion has been demonstrated valid or useful, or not. It is clear that in the 1980s applied linguistics was perceived differently.

Applied linguistics is seen as dynamic as compared to the static theoretical linguistics since applied linguistics is concerned with human problems; furthermore, applied linguistics is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary and, thereby, is highly interactive whereas 'pure' linguistics is isolated since it tries to study the phenomena in isolation; applied linguistics interact even with theoretical linguistics. Applied linguistics, being a human as well as an interactive discipline, gets redefined for each problem and is not a discipline that is defined 'well in advance'.

Applied linguistics, thus, is a constantly changing colligation of subjects and in the process of interaction several inter-disciplines have come to stay. Though inter-disciplines or hybrid disciplines

are 'created', applied linguistics is not to be equated with anyone of them; in other words, applied linguistics is not just educational linguistic or sociolinguistics or psycholinguistics; it is not an anatomy of theoretical linguistics. As J.D. Palmer points out in his 'Linguistics in Medias Res,' that the name applied linguistics is a tautology and that recent attempt to define applied linguistics have become formal and abstract to the point of air-fairness. This is because of the shades of thesis antithesis, and synthesis. It can be pointed out negatively that if all human contexts are removed from applied linguistics (social, psychological, texture, situational, cultural, political, technological, etc.) then applied linguistics will get purified and become 'pure' theoretical linguistics; but this is a negative way of looking at modern integrative phenomena. Applied linguistics invites us to evolve a new kind of synthesis of disciplines that have been taken as clearly demarcated and well defined. Applied linguistics is a new synthesis that should not be viewed in the light of a traditional notion of 'discipline'. The kind of interactive approach suggested to the conception of applied linguistics will have to examine several dualities that have been accepted in the field.

First of all, is it possible to maintain a clear cut dichotomy between theory and practice? This dichotomy is not acceptable and the claim that theory is

objective and practice is only its application has been questioned. Lucien Goldmann (1971 - translated into English from French 1976:91) says in his Cultural Creation : 'In so far as science is a knowledge of the world which not only permits its transformation but also, in the domain of the human sciences, transforms society by its mere development, it is not a matter of affirming a radical separation of theory and practice...clearly every development of a theoretical claim has a practical character and transforms social reality in one direction or another, to a more or less developed degree.'

Similarly, the dichotomy between the individual subject and the society that is maintained in the contemporary human sciences is a fuzzy one; we try to maintain that there are individuals, groups, and 'facts'. Facts are constructed by somebody with a conceptual apparatus which that somebody has not created; every individual constructs facts first within the thought processes and perception and later going outside the immediate perception, up to the most elaborate theories; but the individual subject perceives and constructs subjectively within a civilization, within the logicity of mental structures, categories, values, judgements and criteria which he has not created but those that are given by the world/group which he wants to comprehend. This

means we cannot negate the subjectivity of the subject who perceives; at the same time, we cannot negate the objectivity, of what is given. This shows that one cannot be totally 'subjective' or totally 'objective' because the interactive processes blur this distinction; similarly, we cannot take only the individual or only the group for our study because such distinctions are artificial. There is an individual subject and there is also a transindividual subject, something beyond a particular subject (but not transcendental/' metaphysical) - may be social groups or the world. The paradox is that every individual participates in creating the world and in the process finds the world before him/her, the transindividual has already created the world-institutions, values, social relations, etc. with which a particular subject ties to create world. Understanding of this interactive process (a dialectical process) is very crucial for understanding several dualities in philosophy, general linguistics, as well as applied linguistics.

Often, the interactive processes are emphasized to bring out the dynamic nature of language. For example, speech communities are not taken as static entities that exist but as dynamic organisms that are created in which discourse is constructed and discourse includes literary discourse.

The study of the relevance of language in all human activities and the problems arising out of such relevance is the pursuit of applied linguistics and such a pursuit must necessarily be a cooperative venture. Applied linguistics covers all the major areas of linguistics such as: sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, discourse analysis and narratology stylistics and post structuralism, educational linguistics and language teaching and lexicology etc.

Thus, it is our firm belief that applied linguistics is a useful discipline since it studies the use of language that is why it is not only interesting and challenging but also confusing; like some rivers, it has many sources and several out lets.

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