

The Influence of Linguistics

LINGUISTICS is *not* a teaching technique. It is *not* a method of beginning reading instruction; neither is it a panacea for eliminating most of the reading problems. The classroom teacher will not find all his answers in linguistics; nor will the reading teacher stem the flow of remedial cases simply by applying linguistic principles to teaching procedure; nor will the administrator find everything he needs for a sound reading program in linguistics. Linguistics is not the sole solution to the social revolution in reading.

Yet linguistics, applied practically with scientific and scholarly guidance by linguists with the psychology of learning supplied by the educators, has a positive contribution to the areas of reading, English, and the language arts. Its potential value and enduring worth are currently accompanied by its limited, practical application and translation into classroom procedures.

Administrators, supervisors, and classroom teachers need to understand both the essential principles of linguistics as a discipline and the implications of these principles to the teaching and learning of reading and all the other language

skills. These individuals need all the knowledge and practical help they can obtain to help pupils make the transfer from oral language to printed symbols quickly, easily and accurately. Each month presents new publications—books and articles—which will assist educators to utilize the ideas which are presented by those familiar with linguistics. These recent explanations, together with the many fine publications during recent years, need to receive the special attention of all persons interested in improving instruction. Many of the suggested classroom applications of linguistic principles are still in need of impartial, carefully designed research. The success of some practical applications which good teachers have stumbled upon or approached intuitively can be explained satisfactorily by revealing their linguistic bases.

Many Aspects of Language

There exists the need to evaluate linguistic suggestions as well as to seek the underlying linguistic principles of apparently successful procedures. However, many sensible linguistic concepts should be finding their way more rapidly into daily classroom use. To quote from *Alice*

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Through the Looking-Glass, "The Walrus and the Carpenter," Stanza 11:

"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing wax—
Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings."

The time has indeed arrived for all of us who are interested in improving reading instruction and other areas of the language arts to inform ourselves of the science of linguistics and its contributions. Linguistics is the scientific study of many aspects of language. Each part of the study is worthy of serious, independent consideration: descriptive, comparative, and historical linguistics; transformational and generative grammar and tagmemic analysis; and the study of phonology, morphology, dialectology, and lexicography. Of particular interest to educators is the area of psycholinguistics, based upon the two disciplines of psychology and linguistics. Yet all of these aspects of linguistics have some potential value to education.

Taking the body of knowledge supplied by all the various areas which comprise the discipline of linguistics, we have a scholarly, scientific, and accurate description of the English language: how it has developed, how it functions, and how it can be manipulated. This knowledge explains the tools we use constantly in oral communication; thus it helps young students bridge the interval from oral language to written communication by proceeding from the known to the unknown—to move accurately from oral language to the written.

As teachers and administrators, we especially need to understand the nature of oral language and its relationship to the system of written symbols derived from it. Comprehending the vital role of

meaning which is carried by the supra-segmental features of stress, pitch, or juncture in oral language, we recognize the lack of punctuation, capitalization, or other devices in the written language to carry this full meaning. The recognition of this relative lack in the written dialect gives us some insight into the task of learning to read meaningfully.

Natural Patterns

The study of linguistics has many implications in understanding the process of how meaning can be derived from printed symbols, when it is clearly understood that those symbols are a secondary representation of speech. Some of the promising practices include the securing of natural intonational patterns in oral reading, a recognition of the origin of words, an understanding of the movement of words from one form class to another, the awareness of the syntax appearing in literature, and insights from dialectology and lexicography.

Reading specialists have long been concerned with word readers—that is, pupils who give each word primary stress and who thereby lose the natural rhythm and flow or melody of oral language. A child who reads a sentence like, "The heavy spring rains made the ball park a mass of oozy, sticky mud," with a heavy stress on each word is not getting a proper feel for his language and the groupings of its words into structures of meaning. The teacher might help the pupil to "hear" reading which follows the rhythm and flow and pauses of oral English intonation by having him listen to sentences read easily and naturally and then having him imitate the pattern he hears.

After this the teacher and pupil can discuss the meaning of phrases, such as,

"the heavy spring rains," and "a mass of oozy, sticky mud." The pupils should soon recognize the internal cohesion of each word cluster that is either read or said orally with a single primary stress and only a plus juncture, a very short break or pause, between the words within the phrase as it appears in the context. These phrases or the entire sentence may be said as a duet or solo, but attention should always be given to the natural manner and the rhythm in which these phrases and sentences are spoken.

While it is necessary during the skill development portion of the reading lesson to study, analyze, discuss and relate new words to other words, the teachers should realize that words in isolation always carry primary stress. Therefore, as soon as possible these same words should be used in sentences so that the student can relate individual words to his normal language pattern.

Linguistics has focused our attention on many different ways words enter a language. Certainly elementary pupils can recognize the basic principles of word formation and how new words have entered the language through the process of coining, blending, compounding, imitating, clipping and borrowing. They delight in discovering how astronaut, brunch, UNESCO, or countdown entered our language, as well as finding the many terms we borrowed from the American Indian and other peoples.

Economy in Learning

When the meaning of a new word is developed, considerable learning time could be saved if the word and its various forms were related and taught together. A suffix can change the part of speech or form class to which a word may be assigned, thus enabling a single word to

function in more than a single position or form class.

The following illustration indicates the number of words which can be learned from a single word and suggests the resulting possibilities for economy in learning time and effort. Actually any word in this series could be the beginning core word from which the other words are developed.

The essential point to remember is that the written word should not remain isolated but it should be used in thoughtful, oral sentences. Later these words can appear in written selections.

| | |
|--------------------------|-----------|
| dizzy, dizzier, dizziest | adjective |
| dizzily, dizzying | verb |
| dizzily | adverb |
| dizziness | noun |
| recognizable | adjective |
| recognize, recognized, | |
| recognizing | verb |
| recognizably | adverb |
| recognition. | noun |

As soon as pupils have progressed beyond the stages of initial instruction, they should have the privilege of reading and enjoying well-written sentences, paragraphs, and stories. In fact, even before the pupil is capable of reading good literature for himself, he should have the opportunity of hearing quantities of excellent and varied language constructions read to him by a person who understands the language well and who can interpret the printed page with natural intonational patterns.

The greater the difference between the child's own dialect and the dialect of the printed page, the more attention should be given to listening to oral reading. A written sentence frequently has a syntactical structure different from that commonly employed in oral conversations, and so students of all ages need to hear varieties of constructions in order

to become acquainted with written prose, actually a dialect. For example, the appositive is almost never used in everyday conversation, yet it is quite commonly applied in written discourse. Truly good literature has enduring qualities which make it worth reading more than once. It matters little if the child has heard these stories before, because actually a familiarity with the basic story plot can free the child's attention to focus upon the delight and curiosity for words and an appreciation for the manner in which words are strung together to form delightful, intriguing sentences. Concurrent with the oral reading of literature by the teacher, the pupil should have the opportunity to re-read and enjoy his own favorites and to explore new situations, plots and stories.

The area of dialectology has been overlooked in the elementary school, but as teachers gain an understanding of the variations in language—variations in pronunciation, in vocabulary, and in grammatical structure—they can help students to bridge the gap from their own dialect to that of the printed page as well as to that of characters in stories and books the children are reading. Through the study of dialect and its insights into the way our language actually functions, more effective teaching can be done in teaching acceptable usage. To date we have barely explored the many possibilities suggested by the area of linguistics for more effective reading instruction.

Dialect and Usage

As we become aware of the role of dialect and usage we gain a new insight into the place, function, and design of the dictionary. The information we teach about words and the dictionary should

be accurate and in accordance with the principles of lexicography. When we really understand the impact of the profound statement that dictionaries are *descriptive* and not *prescriptive*, we change our approach to dictionary study and even simple glossary activities become more realistic and significant. Elementary children should be taught how dictionaries are compiled, how lexicographers employ specific usages and citations to build their definitions. The pupils themselves could profitably engage in writing definitions for themselves from citations they "discover" in their textbooks or by simply recording the context in which they find the words they wish to define.

The influence of linguistics will be seen in many areas of the language arts during the next decade. Already many new materials are available for beginning reading instruction and many teaching suggestions are appearing in high-quality professional journals and magazines for interested laymen.

Recently Andrew Schiller, writing in *Harper's Magazine*¹ of the impact of linguistics on English instruction, states that the old will eventually be supplanted by the new; and although the tools have been given us in structural linguistics, it is necessary for us to learn to use them.

Teachers, supervisors and administrators should be encouraged to read professional journals, to attend summer institutes, and to participate in in-service education classes so that they can be informed and ready to appraise and to understand the value and significance of linguistic influences on the improvement of classroom teaching.

¹Andrew Schiller. "The Coming Revolution in Teaching English." *Harper's Magazine* 229: 1373; October 1964.

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