

Feed the medium: reconciling the nature of language with pedagogic practice

Stuart Gale*

***Abstract:** Language is generally defined in terms of its mediatory role between the user and the real world, "a system for meaning" fulfilling the basic human need to conceptualize and develop shared understandings. While such definitions are succinct and perfectly serviceable, they nevertheless fail to encompass how language works, how it affects our perception of reality and who uses it. This deeper appreciation is particularly relevant to language teaching, impinging as it does upon notions of "standard" language and how foreign cultural schemata are introduced into the classroom. The following article therefore presents a more thorough survey and calls for greater toleration and provision for negotiation in how English is taught and assessed, a philosophy wholly consistent with what language is.*

Introduction: language as (a sub-category of) communication

"No matter how eloquently a dog may bark, he cannot tell you his parents

* Foreign Language Instructor, Fukuoka University

were poor but honest."

Bertrand Russel, quoted in Widdowson, 1996, p. 5.

What is language? Perhaps, as Russel's observation would suggest, it is the unique accomplishment of the human species, that preeminent trait by which man may be distinguished from beast. And yet communication of sorts also exists between animals, and sometimes to an impressively sophisticated degree. Whenever a bird sings or bee dances it does so in order to establish communal ties and convey meaning. If this were not true the species in question would in all probability be brought to extinction within a generation or two, a victim of its own inability to gather sufficient food, evade predators or find breeding partners. That animal communication is at least a tool for survival (and one that is routinely exploited, often elaborate and, in many cases, transparently essential) is beyond dispute. What concerns us here is its failure, consistent in all its forms, to be recognized as "language". Clearly this failure cannot be understood if we are to apply an exclusively semantic proviso of "utterances carrying meaning". Instead, a more holistic interpretation is required:

- i) Language is *systematic*, i.e. it must provide a set of shared structures allowing the user to form and interpret meaning.
- ii) Language is *mutable*, i.e. it allows the user to make sense of and interact with the real world through the adaptation of existing structures and the creation of new ones.
- iii) As a consequence of this mutability, language is constantly *developing* and must be *acquired* by the user.

(Sapir, 1962, p.2)

These criteria are interdependent and have the cumulative effect of empowering the user in relation to his or her world. Language, as distinct from communication, is therefore not merely the by-product of some instinctive, automated response. Instead, it provides the user with almost unlimited scope for proactive interaction by making, in the words of Wilhelm Von Humboldt, "infinite use of finite media" (quoted in Pinker, 1995, p. 84).

What, then, can we disqualify from language? Forms of animal communication such as bee-dancing and birdsong are apparently reactive and devoid of a creative element. They are in this regard entirely systematic and therefore entirely immutable. Other forms of animal communication such as dogs barking apparently lack any structure at all, though it should be noted that if language is indeed species-specific then so is our conception of it. Nevertheless, the canine idiom capable of conveying information about a dog's parents has so far eluded us, and while it cannot be proven beyond doubt that language is the sole preserve of humans, little or no firm evidence exists to the contrary. Even highly-publicized experiments with chimpanzees and sign language only indubitably reveal what we already know, i.e. that more intelligent animal species are disposed to certain behaviour patterns or, perhaps more accurately, *mimicry* in anticipation of reward. While the nagging suspicion that chimps merely "go through the motions" as part of an elaborate conditioned reflex has never been allayed, their inability to cope with abstraction suggests that they have no natural capacity for language in this, albeit unnatural, medium.

How language works: a brief overview

Having defined language in terms of its intrinsic nature, let us now examine how this acquired, mutable and developing system works in relation to an ever-changing world. To this end, the all-important element of flexibility manifests itself in four distinct ways, namely via arbitrariness, duality, the exploitation of different media, and a productive facility.

As we have already established, our species-specific conception of language consists of a predominantly oral "system of voluntarily produced symbols" (Sapir, 1962, p. 5). These linguistic signs bear no resemblance to their respective meanings, instead working purely as a matter of convention (Widdowson, 1996, p. 5). The manner in which words are applied is therefore *arbitrary*- an idiosyncrasy derived from (to then become emblematic of) a distinct culture. Even onomatopoeia is subject to arbitrary interpretation, as illustrated by the different ways in which English and Japanese speakers conceive of the sound made by dogs, i.e. "woof" and "wan" respectively. In terms of mutual comprehensibility, neither symbol is transferable to the other's social context.

As the source of this contextual specificity, arbitrariness is both limited and limiting. Individuals do not have complete autonomy in their choice of symbols and must operate within the confines of a shared system. While the parameters of this system are open to negotiation, any attempt to disregard them entirely implies the production of unintelligible words or (in more extreme cases) outright gibberish. Nevertheless, and while the arbitrary application of symbols to meaning militates against the universality of language, it enables human beings to account for and "divide up" reality according to culture-specific conceptions of it. This capacity is

reflected by the plethora of words denoting different types of "snow" in the language used by Eskimos, or "grass" in that used by African plains-dwellers. In both instances, a community of language users has refined meaning relative to a minute aspect of reality specifically relevant to them.

These culture-specific conceptions of reality are themselves dynamic, and therefore irreconcilable with the more static forms of communication found in the animal kingdom. That language is able to cope despite being composed of a finite number of arbitrary symbols and constrained by considerations of mutual intelligibility is attributable to *duality*, i.e. the rearrangement of its composite parts to form new meaning. The subsequent flexibility afforded the user accounts for the day-to-day creative element of language as wholly original combinations are formed and discarded as the situation demands. As a consequence, meaning is reduced to the status of negotiable commodity, residing not in words but in how we use them (Adler and Rodman, 1982, pp. 19, 65). That this duality operates irrespective of whether the language is written or spoken emphasizes a further contribution made to flexibility by the *exploitation of different media*. No other species seems to have taken advantage of a secondary delivery system and its concurrent benefits (e.g. temporal/spatial) for the dissemination of information (Widdowson, 1996, p. 7). Nor do animals exhibit a perceptible *productive facility*. Indeed, this unique ability to encode shifts in reality, if not synchronously then soon through the production of new structures, consolidates our view of language as anthropocentric.

Language as cognitive phenomenon and conceptual medium

"Language is...a kind of latent structure in the human mind, developed and fixed by exposure to specific linguistic experience."

Chomsky, 1972, p. 130.

Language is therefore the generic accomplishment of the human species, but to what extent can we argue that it is genetically innate? The quote from Chomsky contains two assumptions, one more contentious than the other. The first is that human brains are equipped with a specialized apparatus for the acquisition of language. Taken at face value, this has much in common with Pinker's "language instinct" theory in that both repudiate behaviourism, i.e. language acquisition as contingent upon nurture and a very general cognitive potential. Chomsky's unique achievement, however, was in offering an alternative conceptual model via the Language Acquisition Device (the "latent structure" referred to above).

The viability of Chomsky's model need not concern us here. Indeed, from a purely pedagogic perspective the entire debate would seem to be merely one of emphasis. Academic opinion, then as now, converges on the second of Chomsky's assumptions, i.e. that language (or the settings of the Universal Grammar, as Chomsky envisaged them) is environmentally determined by exposure to a specific form of linguistic experience. And just as an individual's choice of language is susceptible to the influence of context, so language enables him or her to conceive of and effect change upon it. In this sense, the relationship is one of reciprocal coercion and is indicative of language's role as "social semiotic" (Halliday, 1970, pp. 13-15).

If, however, language is the exclusive medium through which humans conceptualize and make sense of reality, it logically entails a myriad of different and potentially incompatible schemata derived from and relative to "specific linguistic experience". This, in essence, is the basis of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, a strong interpretation of which presupposes profound and disastrous consequences for cross-cultural communication. The fact that successful interaction occurs, while not invalidating the hypothesis entirely, at least suggests that a weaker form is more appropriate, i.e. that conceptual differences exist but that these are not necessarily mutually exclusive or impervious to negotiation. Alien schema may be acquired just as our own may be voluntarily suppressed in the interests of cross-cultural intelligibility.

Pedagogic implications

Having described language in terms of its composition and function, let us now examine the implications of our model relative to second and foreign language acquisition. To this end, three main areas of concern will be discussed, specifically *what to teach*, *who should teach* and finally *how to teach*.

i) What to teach: the issue of authenticity

In either its literal or more diluted form, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (i.e. language as conceptually loaded and culture-specific medium) is consistent with the introduction of authentic language into the classroom. The hypothesis presupposes a need for familiarization relative to alien schemata, thereby rendering exposure to authentic language defensible in

terms of enhanced awareness and/or negotiation skills. This raises the question, however, as to whether authenticity is transferable across contexts. As Kramersch has pointed out, any newspaper, movie or diary extract has its own distinct orientation, remote from the classroom and (potentially) everyone in it (1998, p. 81). By substituting the legitimate, contextually bound semantic link for a contrivance, the teacher risks rendering the language patently *inauthentic* and susceptible to misinterpretation by the learner. In response to these concerns, Widdowson has suggested that all pretence to authenticity be eschewed in favour of a more transparent alternative:

"It would seem that language for learning does need to be specifically designed for pedagogic purposes, so that it can be made real in the context of the student's own world".

Widdowson, 1993, p. 8.

While acknowledging the theoretical validity of these reservations, it is the contention here that the application of contextually remote language to the classroom is defensible. By emphasizing the contextual specificity of language, Kramersch, Widdowson *et al.* seem to be disputing the existence of the conceptual faculty, inherent to every human being and therefore every learner, responsible for diluting the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Contexts are not immutable or wholly unpredictable entities, and even the most culturally monolithic of people encounter and adapt to new contextual data as a matter of course. The ability of language learners to negotiate with and incorporate contextually remote language into broader schemata

should therefore not surprise us. Whether or not the semantic links thus formed are accurate (i.e. in accordance with those at the source) is dependent upon the amount and variety of similarly "authentic" language similarly introduced. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that, given the human propensity for semantic negotiation and idiosyncratic interpretation, such concepts as "accurate" are somewhat ephemeral if they exist at all.

What is incontestable, however, is that language learners can, and habitually do, make valid semantic links between words never previously encountered and contextual settings never experienced. Exposure to language drawn from foreign contexts is also stimulating and prepares the learner for similar encounters beyond the classroom. Any suggestion that the only legitimately authentic (and therefore the only authentically legitimate) classroom language is that specifically designed for the purpose tends to ignore the wholly contrived and contextually nomadic nature of such input. Relieving learners of the burden of conceiving of meaning beyond the literal/empirical also deprives them of valuable negotiation practice. As a consequence, beneficiaries of specifically designed language risk becoming inextricably bound to the comfort-zone of the classroom and ill-prepared for the tribulations of contextual diversity beyond.

ii) Who should teach: authenticity versus autonomy

The authenticity debate also applies to our second area of concern, namely who should teach, or rather who is best equipped to teach a second or foreign language. According to Widdowson, all classroom instructors lie somewhere on a gradient between two polar opposites (*ibid.*). At one

extreme is the native speaker, drawn from a foreign context and representing *authenticity* by virtue of his or her affinity with the semantic and pragmatic implications of the target language and corresponding distance from the culture in and around the classroom. That the indigenous schema is commonly presumed to be corruptive is reflected in the case of the native-speaker teaching English at a university in Japan who, after many years service, was dismissed on grounds of having lost her *gaijin-ness* (Nagamine, 2002). This mentality implies a preference for authenticity over *autonomy*, i.e. instruction offered by non-native-speakers with the same cultural orientation as the learners and/or the classroom. Nevertheless, it is arguably the latter form of instruction that allows the learner greater possession of the language relative to his or her own contextual reality.

In determining a preference for one or the other, it may well be that the nature of the classroom itself is of paramount importance. In cases where learners are drawn from multi-contextual backgrounds, it is virtually impossible for the teacher to identify with all the various schemata and aspire to autonomy. Authenticity, as embodied in the personal orientation of the teacher, therefore becomes the most pedagogically defensible option by default- if learners must undergo schematic readjustment, then it might as well be in the direction of that affiliated with the target language. Furthermore, multicultural classes may be conducive to and even indicative of a receptive attitude toward alien schemata.

It is in the monocultural classroom that autonomy becomes a more viable alternative. Nevertheless, even here, the target language-to-context relationship is crucial. In EFL classrooms, learners are unlikely to be in possession of a local variety of English. This sense of alienation from the

target language may be most acute in contexts where it has no local relevance beyond the passing of exams. As a consequence, the emphasis reverts to acquisition for use in a variety of foreign contexts and a set of pedagogic objectives consistent with authenticity, i.e. inter-contextual familiarity and schematic negotiation practice.

The same logic presupposes a shift to competence in the local variety and the indigenous teacher in monocultural ESL classrooms. Nevertheless, the ease with which the authenticity/autonomy debate may thus be resolved exposes it as somewhat facile if conceived of in either/or terms. As we have already suggested, contextual schemata are highly personalized constructs even when filtering shared information. As a result, no individual is capable of giving a definitively meaningful account of any experience to any other. What actually occurs is the partial conveyance of a subjective version, which even then is reinterpreted, evaluated and subsequently incorporated or rejected by the recipient. Schemata are therefore in a constant state of negotiation with new data, and that this applies to abstract as well as literal/empirical input is crucial to the conceptual faculty referred to above. Relative to our debate, this faculty enables meaningful learning to occur even if the teacher is a non-native speaker derived from a remote context, i.e. one pertaining to neither authenticity or autonomy.

It is therefore apparent that this conceptual faculty allows learners to transcend the contextual orientation of the teacher as well as the language of the classroom. This is not to imply that learners need only be exposed to a single, indiscriminate schema in order to be able to apply valid semantic links to any context. Rather it suggests that teachers should foster

schematic negotiation as they already do multi-dialecticism by maximizing the variety of exposure and opportunities for practice.

iii) How to teach: facilitating negotiation

As we have seen, language is the medium through which human beings conceive of an ever-changing world and negotiate with an array of alternative schemata pertaining to the same. That this definition is contrary to the mono-dialecticism and standardization prevalent in many classrooms is, for better or worse, partially obscured by the conceptual faculty inherent to all learners. Nevertheless, it is the contention of this paper that language teachers have a responsibility to more actively engage this faculty and facilitate usage beyond the contextual setting of the classroom. This implies increased exposure to dialectic and schematic varieties, and a corresponding emphasis on meaning over form.

This mission statement assumes that "good language" is most easily recognizable in terms of its ability to procure speech act objectives. If meaning is conveyed, any deviation from a phonological or grammatical standard may be legitimately regarded as irrelevant or of secondary concern. Relative to pedagogy, this more holistic and overtly functional view of language involves not penalizing learners in cases where grammatical accuracy (or a lack thereof) is redundant to meaning. It challenges the disproportionate emphasis currently afforded forms of little or no real communicative value (e.g. question tags) and encourages teachers to focus on and promote generalizations as opposed to exceptions.

Above all, this deeper appreciation of language reinstates and refines its primary role as a system for meaning. This entails adjusting assessment

criteria to more accurately reflect real world interactive ability, and renders language proficiency analogous to successful negotiation with unfamiliar dialects and schemata in unforeseeable contexts. And with residual concerns regarding authenticity allayed by the conceptual faculty, the language teacher is free to facilitate this process through the introduction of as much variety into the classroom as possible.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to emphasize and explain the nature of language and its mediatory role relative to the infinite array of schemata impinging upon human existence. As the medium of negotiation, we have suggested that language reconciles different mental constructs of reality by working in tandem with a cognitive conceptual faculty. Though innate, this faculty is considered to be amenable to stimulation and development through exposure to (and subsequent negotiation with) a broad range of authentic cultural varieties. In pedagogic terms, this implies greater dialectic and schematic toleration, the rejection of standard models, and the elevation of pedagogic goals and assessment criteria based on accuracy of meaning rather than accuracy of style.

References

- Adler, R. M. and Rodman, G. (1982), *Understanding human communication*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Chomsky, N. (1972), "Language and the mind" in *Language in education*,

edited by A. Cashdan and E. Grugeon, Routledge and Keegan Paul Ltd., pp. 129-136.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1970), "Language structure and language function" in *New horizons in linguistics*, edited by J. Lyons, Penguin, pp. 141-156.

Kramersch, C. (1998), *Language and Culture*, Oxford University Press.

Nagamine, A. (2002), *Internationalization in Okinawan Universities* (ONLINE ARTICLE), retrieved March 8, 2005: <http://themargins.net/fps/student/nagamine.html>

Pinker, S. (1995), *The language instinct*, Penguin.

Sapir, E. (1962), "Language defined" in *Introductory readings on language*, edited by W. L. Anderson and N. C. Stageberg, Holt, Rinhart and Winston Inc., pp. 2-22.

Widdowson, H. G. (1993), "The ownership of English" in *IATEFL 1993 annual conference report*, IATEFL, pp. 5-9.

Widdowson, H.G. (1996), *Linguistics*, Oxford University Press.