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ABSTRACT

Linguistics ought to do something besides train new linguists; there is a good deal about language that has philosophical and social import and should be a part of general education. In developing curricula for linguistics courses, four major distinctions have special relevance: (1) a philosophical vs a professional introduction to linguistics; the philosophical introduction is for general education, the professional for those preparing to be professional linguistics; (2) observation vs. formalism; non-majors need to observe in principle the meaning of the formal aspects of an analysis whereas majors need to know how to justify the formal aspects of an analysis; (3) teachers vs. students; language study offers opportunities for students to participate in the scientific process; thus student observation should be recognized as valid by teachers; (4) language vs. linguistics; the usage of "language" as opposed to "linguistics" in the nomenclature of introductory courses emphasizes the need for making substantive statements about language as opposed to the justification of the formalism behind the generalizations. The study of linguistics, if expanded to stimulate the interest of non-professionals, will contribute not only to the self-preservation of the profession economically, but will lead to better linguistic theory. (LG)

LINGUISTICS FOR NON-MAJORS

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I think the most revealing way of viewing the topic "Linguistics for Non-Majors" is education in linguistics for people not preparing to become professional linguists. I am motivated by the thought that in their capacity as teachers, linguists ought to do something else besides train new linguists, and this because I believe there is a good deal known about language that has philosophical and social import and deserves to be a part of general education. An understanding of language can be useful in a number of professions besides linguistics, and should be part of everyone's view of people and society.

Problems of both a general and a particular nature present themselves in respect to the kinds of curriculum and teaching that should be offered at various levels. I am convinced that we are dealing ultimately not just with matters of pedagogy, but with the kind of linguistic theory that is important to the teachers.

I will address myself now to five interrelated and overlapping distinctions that seem to me to have special relevance. I have oversimplified the distinction between majors and non-majors in a number of instances, but I hope I have touched on some of the deeper issues.

(1) A philosophical vs. a professional introduction to linguistics:

At its best, the profession of linguistics is characterized by a commitment to linguistics as a science and as a part of the humanities: people define their professional work within a common universe of discourse (cf. Kuhn's 1962 fine discussion on how limiting the universe of discourse facilitates scientific progress), share knowledge and cooperate in carrying out fruitful new research; competition among colleagues is aimed at excellence for its own sake. But as in every academic discipline, the profession is also an arena of competition for power: people work hard to gain access to careers and then challenge each other for jobs and recognition; many are those who resist being dominated by this perspective, but none can ignore it. This kind of negative professionalism leads to impoverished intellectual work (cf. Chomsky 1973 for a penetrating discussion) and has disastrous effects on students.

A professional introduction to linguistics is one which for better or for worse prepares people to be professional linguists. It is no doubt the easiest one for a professional linguist to teach. A philosophical introduction to linguistics would be one where questions are cast in respect not only to standards within linguistics, but to the larger concerns of our culture: one would focus on those inquiries in linguistics that can lead to a better understanding of the human condition, the individual and society, child development, the mind of man, racism, cultural prejudice and fear,

the scientific process, and so forth. By definition, a philosophical approach would be the ideal one for general education, but I think it is an open question to what extent the philosophical approach can be compatible with the exigencies of professional linguistics even at its best. A philosophical approach will help anyone be a better specialist up to a point, but it can reasonably be argued that for most mortals with limited energy there is a point of diminishing returns where a choice must be made. The problem is compounded by the negative aspects of professionalism in academia. Non-majors are sometimes viewed as an annoyance that take linguists away from their "real work". For students the academic disciplines can look something like exclusive guilds.

(2) Research vs. teaching:

There is an essential interplay between pedagogy and scholarship. Broadly speaking, pedagogy has to do with understanding one's subject matter from the point of view of people less acquainted with it, and making the essence of one's thoughts clear to them. This means seeing the connection between one's thought and a more generally accepted frame of reference; this would appear to be a necessary ingredient in any meaningful research. At least some pedagogical effort contributes to good scholarship. But again there is a problem of time and energy; moreover, job security and other professional rewards go much more to excellence in research and publication than in teaching. All this makes a problem for teaching to majors, let alone non-majors.

(3) Observation vs. formalism:

One of the most common complaints from non-majors is that linguistics courses have too much formalism. From my experience I think there is a basis for this complaint. No formalism is worth much unless it facilitates generalizations about interesting observations and makes correct predictions about new data. Any linguist worth his salt knows that formal universals are just higher level working hypotheses. Jerry Morgan writes in the introduction to his dissertation (Morgan 1973) that Jim McCawley taught him to be in awe of language and not of theories. I believe linguistics deserves to be called a science because of the amount of good work that has gone beyond the bounds of mere taxonomy, and because there is something of a universal theory of language for evaluating competing analyses of the same data. But there is little known about language that is truly axiomatic in the way that a lot in for example Physics can be called axiomatic. Nothing is sacred in linguistics, not transformations, not binary features, not the Katz-Postal hypothesis, nothing. In Physics, one might be able to justify a certain amount of rote learning by students of formal statements, but then again maybe not. Certainly in linguistics teaching formalism as if it were axiomatic is dishonest. Teachers or textbooks that do not convey a sense of the interplay between data and theory do their students a disservice, be they majors or non-majors.

I think there is an essential difference between majors and non-majors at this juncture, however, or at least between students interested in making original contributions to linguistic theory as opposed to those who do not have that interest but who nevertheless want to make linguistics part of

their general education. The former need to know how to justify the formal aspects of an analysis, the latter need to know only in principle what that means. There is the distinction that is crucial for the specialist between adequacy and necessity in linguistic descriptions: to prove an analysis necessary, one must show that all the alternative analyses one could reasonably conceive of are less adequate; in order to be able to do this, one must be acquainted with the formal properties of rival theories that might bear on a given problem. There is less interest for the non-specialist to compare rival theories in any comprehensive way.

It is not only because of limitations on time that a non-specialist will be less interested in formalism than a specialist: the primary concern is with the broader philosophical and social implications in what is known about language or in questions to which only tentative answers can be offered; it will follow that focus will fall on the substantive generalizations that are emerging in the study of language, and there will be relatively little concern for justifying the particular form of generalizations. There is a chicken and egg relationship between form and substance in the way the understanding of the universe develops and neither aspect of the process can be isolated from the other. But there is, I think, a genuine pedagogical issue here. One can choose which aspect of the process to foreground in the classroom. It is, for example, an exciting fact that all languages have relative clauses, all languages have information questions, but no language allows an information question where the interrogated element is a noun phrase in a relative clause, e.g. "*What did you meet the man that invented?" For specialists, the main interest arises in examining the implications of this fact for a universal theory of language, where this fact can be shown to follow from more abstract principles which will also predict some other facts. For non-specialists this fact can be of interest in itself; beyond that, it can serve to uphold the broader philosophical point, one just taken for granted by specialists, that there is such a thing as human nature, that some things are possible as cultural artifacts and others are not. Specialists will go on to explore the theory of syntactic islands that has eminated from Haj Ross's work, and quite rightly so. Non-specialists might or might not do this in an ideal curriculum. The reasons for doing so would not be the same. Specialists need to know and remember the various products that are emerging from linguistic research as much as they need to understand the process by which they are obtained. For non-specialists, a detailed knowledge of products will be an encumbrance; the process together with a general understanding of the nature of language is what will be most useful (cf. Blacking's 1969 very illuminating "Process and product in human society").

(4) Teachers vs. students:

The study of language offers one of the best opportunities for beginning students to participate in the scientific process, and this because the prime data is so accessible. In an important respect, the students can have as much access to the truth as the teachers (cf. O'Neil's 1956 excellent presentation of this point). In knowledge about language, teachers and students are unequal, but an interesting observation from a student is worth just as much as one from a teacher; a significant number of beginning students can be quite good at finding revealing examples including ones that test

hypotheses. The best way in which students can gain a sense of the interplay between data and theory is to have some experience at doing their own analysis of some original observations they have been able to make about their language. This is just as important for non-majors as for majors. It gives an insight not only into the scientific process as manifested in linguistics, but creates an appreciation of the task accomplished by every child that masters the language of its community.

A related matter in the relationship between teacher and student is the willingness of teachers to discuss questions that they do not know the answers to. There is such a thing as a valuable observation that our present theory has no way of formalizing, and questions that are extremely important from a social and philosophical point of view that we cannot at this point begin to answer. Far from suppressing these points, teachers should value them highly. Partly because of a positivist belief in the obtainability of complete, final, objective truth about the universe, and partly because of professional elitism, teachers sometimes try to create a situation where they appear to know all the answers. This is damaging to education always, and especially with beginning students who think of themselves as outsiders to the field. In fact, knowledge is always relative, we will never know any ultimate truth about language or any other part of the universe, and there is a real sense in which students and teachers can ask questions together about their subject matter. (cf. Polanyi 1964 for an excellent critique of positivism, and Freire 1968 for what amounts to a superb presentation of an anti-positivist position, as well as a number of related points about teachers, students, and the process of education. Freire is not talking about the university situation, but a number of his ideas can easily be applied in that direction.)

(5) Language vs. linguistics:

It is worthy of note that introductory courses conceived of as part of general education are in several instances I know of being called "introduction to language" as opposed to "introduction to linguistics". "Introduction to Language" is the title of the excellent Fromkin and Rodman textbook (1974). The difference in nomenclature is revealing. For one thing it is consonant with the emphasis I have suggested is appropriate on substantive statements about language as opposed to the justification of the formalism being used to make generalizations. I suspect this is one of the reasons for the name. Note again, however, that it can only be a matter of pedagogical emphasis here; there can be no such thing as a good course on the nature of language without a lot of linguistics as well. Perhaps another reason for the title "Introduction to Language" is that formal theories of language have been too narrow to encompass all the interesting questions about language a layman would like to ask. The courses have sometimes been creative attempts to extend the theory of language.

There appears to be a need for a curriculum in linguistics the primary aim of which is a contribution to general education and to the professional education of people who won't become linguists, but who will nevertheless make use of the understanding of language in their professional work (speech pathologists, philosophers, literature specialists, teachers of languages and teachers of all other kinds, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists,

biologists, translators, people learning foreign languages, lawyers, etc.). Introductory courses are primary, but more than that is needed. I wouldn't want to think of such a curriculum as being altogether separate from the one for specialists. Non-majors going beyond the introductory level can gain some benefit from courses taken by majors; on the other hand, linguistics majors need to take some courses where the primary emphasis is on the philosophical and social relevance of what is being learned about language. For one thing, if they become linguists they ought to be ready to teach such courses themselves.

I have addressed myself here primarily to linguists who teach in colleges and universities and to students preparing to do the same; however, I think that the study of language is important for primary and secondary school as well. Thus, professional linguists are not the only teachers of linguistics and there are questions of pedagogy for teaching situations outside universities that I have not begun to touch. Primary and secondary school teachers are trained in universities, however, and linguists have an opportunity and a responsibility to do some teaching relevant to their needs and possibilities.

A natural concern for self-preservation will give increasing impetus in the profession to the idea of linguistics for non-majors. But there are more than economic reasons why it will be good for linguists to give some of their creative energies in that direction. While there are ways in which broader pedagogical goals will conflict with goals of scientific excellence just in terms of time and energy, I am convinced that greater concern for the wider social import of linguistic research will lead to better linguistic theory.

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