# LINGUISTICS AS A SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITY: EXPLODING MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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The language profession in South Africa on which linguistics has probably had the least impact in recent times is that of English first language teaching. This paper suggests a number of reasons for this state of affairs and then goes on, by exploring an issue that has once again become topical, i.e. the role of grammar in the curriculum, to argue that linguistics does indeed have much to offer the English first language teacher because it can enable him to subvert established myths about language and language learning, to arrive at fresh insights about language, and to learn something about the nature of scientific inquiry into the bargain.

In the vast majority of cases, graduate teachers of African languages and of Afrikaans will have had far more exposure to some kind of linguistics than their local English teaching counterparts. Adams' words, in his general editor's introduction to Mittins (1991:viii), apply most validly to this latter group:

> ...with the decline of traditional grammar teaching since the 1950's, there is a whole generation of teachers of English to whom the whole field of language, even at the most elementary level, is a closed book.

Although traditional grammar has in recent times hardly been taught as such in English first language classrooms, teachers continue to absorb the attitudes toward language that have characterised traditional grammar down the ages - attitudes founded more on myth than on fact, or, to use one of the distinctions charted by Botha (1992), attitudes that have their roots in fictitious linguistic things rather than in real linguistic things.

Why have these attitudes continued to flourish? Well, the linguists themselves are of course partly to blame. The structuralists exposed traditional grammar as unscientific, vague and prescriptive, but they failed to engage in effective dialogue with language educationists, and their model of language was not easily reconcilable with the more enduring ideas about what the best kind of education involves. Teachers found themselves on the receiving end of a rather dry, unpalatable form of behaviourist scientism which tried to programme pupils into a kind of knee-jerk awareness of how the forms of their mother tongue connected with one another: no real attempt was made to connect all this with the world of education.

This inevitably led to further estrangement between linguistics and English teachers, and so it is hardly surprising that the neostructuralists, the transformational-generativists who subsequently represented the dominant paradigm in linguistics, have if anything had even less of an effect on English first language

teaching. They too did not succeed in making their perspective relevant to the needs of teachers, and it is this paradigm, above all - particularly in its "mopping up" phase (Kuhn 1962) - that risks being seen by language teachers as being "not really the study of language at all, but some more esoteric glass-bead game that should be left to high priests of the cult..." (Brumfit 1992:35).

It should be clear, then, that if linguistics is indeed to offer something of lasting value to the first language teacher, linguists are going to have to do their applicational homework better than they have done in the past. They are going to have to consider carefully where the average teacher is linguistically, to tune in to the teacher's needs and aims, to select accordingly the most pedagogically relevant aspects of their discipline and be prepared to work eclectically. In my view, they should not set out so much to offer yet another classification of the nuts and bolts of language; rather, they should try to ensure that language teachers are carefully inducted into the *how* of linguistics: into linguistic science as a particular way of behaving in the presence of language. This is, surely, the real potential value of linguistics for English first language teaching, and I hope shortly to show how this potential might be realised in the context of the latest moves by the Transvaal Education Department to reintroduce English grammar into the Senior Certificate examination.

Before considering this initiative, and the dangers and the opportunities it offers for linguistics, we should first examine further where exactly English first language teachers tend to find theselves linguistically. The sad truth of the matter is that most teachers have usually had nothing better to cultivate than the myths about language that have long formed part of the cultural baggage of establishment English courses and which have been handed down to them more or less *en passant* while their lecturers get on with the "real" business of teaching them about literature. These myths constitute what has been variously described as "folklore linguistics" (Mittins 1991:viii) or the "flat earth" view of language (Thornton 1986:13).

## A heritage of myths and misconceptions

Teachers of English as a first language carry, as a rule, much more traditional language baggage than their counterparts in, for example, African languages and Afrikaans. Why? Probably the main reason for this is that most of the baggage was originally packed by the classical grammarians, who had a disproportionate effect on the English educational establishment. The study of classics in public schools and universities

> ...bequeathed mistaken emphases on Greek and Latin grammar and on the status of written texts, which constituted the only available corpus of evidence. When English Literature emerged as a subject for University study in the late nineteenth century, it seems to have assumed that, as far as language, and its structure were concerned, Latin was the key. (Thornton 1986:14).

In fact, the view of language described here by Thornton predated the emergence of English literature as a university subject by at least a century, with the publication of the prescriptive Latinate English grammars of the eighteenth century. These, especially the future Bishop of London Robert Lowth's *Short introduction to English grammar* (1762) and the American Lindley Murray's grammar of 1795, had enormous influence on the growing, upwardly mobile but linguistically insecure middle classes. This influence, mediated by a myriad grammar books and at least tacitly supported by most university and college English literature departments, remains with us today, and so the myths flourish.

Most linguists will be generally aware of these myths. I would like here to examine in a little more detail what is probably the central myth informing English first language teaching attitudes, one which underpins various misconceptions about language. We shall see later that this myth has made itself felt, despite what appear to be protestations to the contrary, in the recent attempt by the Transvaal Education Department to ensure the explicit teaching of grammar in the English first language curriculum.

I shall refer to this particular myth as the Language Paradise Lost myth. This is because at its root is the idea that language should be - or even that it has been at some distant time in the past - "perfect". As such, language should also be - or once was - perfectly "logical". Although all languages have now been corrupted, the ancient classical tongues, Greek and Latin, were much closer to the perfect state than English. Thanks to the grammarians, however, whose brief it is to set strict standards of "correctness" following the Latin model and then to ensure that these standards are maintained, English can be prevented from further corruption and Standard English can be saved from the depths of depravity to which "the dialects" have sunk. It follows that in terms of this myth, all change is for the worse, rules should be prescribed and then set in stone and the best way to improve one's English is to acquaint oneself thoroughly with the rules (and the "parts of speech" in terms of which they are expressed) and to apply them to the letter.

One might quite understandably be a little sceptical about the extent to which teachers still subscribe to this Language Paradise Lost myth in the final decade of the twentieth century. Though many teachers might scoff at the description given in the last paragraph, their attitudes and their behaviour in the language classroom nevertheless provide clear testimony to the enduring power of this myth. Thus local English first language teachers may no longer know much Latin, but on the basis of a number of seminars held with English teachers and lecturers I can attest to the partiality of many for *It is I* as an answer to *Who's there*? - at least in theory, even if not in their actual on-line usage. On the issue of "logic" I remember an English literature lecturer becoming particular irate about the "stupidity" of the "illogical" dialectal expression *get off of*. In similar vein, Watson (1987:23) reports that he "once heard an honours graduate in English language assert that Standard English became the prestige dialect because it is the only dialect of English that allows logical thought"!

**Exploding the myths and misconceptions**

The Language Paradise Lost myth is still very much in place amongst English first language teachers today and, as indicated earlier, any attempt by linguists to make more impact on these teachers will - in keeping with a well known pedagogical principle - have to start where they are. They will have to help them to address the myth and the misconceptions that derive from it directly, to understand its origins and to appreciate the dangers it poses to any attempt to develop a more intellectually and educationally acceptable view of language in the classroom. One could make a good start by following the advice of I.A. Richards, as quoted in Postman and Weingartner (1966:72):

> The natural curiosity about how language works ... struggles hard before it chokes. Formal descriptive grammar generates a resentment against the grammarian, which is traditional to the subject. I believe that this resentment can be made use of, and that it would be excellent pedagogy to open a course on the theory of grammar with an exhibition of some of the odd arbitrarinesses and mistakes of grammarians - to serve as a sort of animated coconut-shy for our pupils.

Postman and Weingartner (1966:72-73) give examples of high school teaching initiatives along these lines, including exercises where students were asked to consider various grammarians' attempts to define what a sentence is and to ponder over why the definitions were all so different, and another exercise in which a number of grammarians' explanations of their own function as grammarians were discussed. We could make the Language Paradise Lost myth our coconut-shy, with the misconceptions it engenders as the targets of our linguistic missiles.

Thus the "English grammar should follow Latin grammar" coconut could be shied at by asking our teacher trainees to consider questions such as: What do you usually say after knocking on the door and hearing the question *Who's there?* Who says *It is I*? Have you any idea why they say this? Do you know why people who tell us to say *It is I* usually also want us to say *She is older than I*? What's wrong with these people's arguments? Similar work could be done on sentence-final prepositions, split infinitives, and all the other pet shibboleths of the prescriptive grammarians.

The "language must be logical" coconut could be demolished with the help of questions such as: Which do you prefer: *I got off the wall* or *I got off of the wall*? Why? What then about *I came out the rain* and *I came out of the rain*? Which do you prefer: *I don't want any* or *I don't want none*? Why? How does negation work in Afrikaans/French/Zulu? Are these languages less logical than English because they can signal negation in two places within the same sentence? Does it matter? Are there some good reasons why language shouldn't be strictly logical?

The "grammar must be prescriptive", "dialects are corruptions" and other coconuts can be disposed of in a similar manner. I shall deal with the "knowing the parts of speech improves one's English" coconut presently, when considering the latest initiative by the Transvaal Education Department. The point being argued for at the moment is that linguistics can best make an impact on teachers if it is introduced to them as an agent of subversion, with the help of which they can explore critically the received ideas about language they have grown up with before moving on to new vistas. For linguistics can indeed be a subversive activity, undermining "common sense" views of language (for an "uncommon sense" view of English teaching, see Mayher (1990)), fomenting scepticism toward doctrinaire prescriptions and insisting on reason rather than specious authority as a basis for talk about language.

The "activity" aspect of the characterisation of linguistics as a subversive activity should also be stressed here. From the very start, our target group of language teachers should be actively involved in doing linguistics. As teachers, they should be the first to agree that this is the best way to ensure positive attitudes toward the subject, which in their turn will lead to heightened curiosity about language and a desire to learn more about it.

This subversive activity becomes more constructive as the participants develop a questioning, open, objective stance toward language issues and a better understanding of linguistic concepts, how these arise, and what one can do with them. Once the myths have been exploded, our target group of students could be helped to a keener appreciation of what it means to say that linguistics is the science of language and that one does linguistics by behaving in a scientific manner about language. Such behaviour involves a number of activities that together constitute the process of scientific inquiry, such as defining, questioning, observing, classifying, hypothesising and hypothesis testing. Linguistic tasks should be planned to involve participants in this process of inquiry. Let us consider briefly by way of example some outlines to an approach to the question: What is an adjective?

One could start with the act of *defining*, and present traditional definitions of the adjective, such as: "it may describe a noun and make it clearer or fuller" or "it may limit the noun, and so distinguish the person or thing from the mass of its kind" (McMagh 1980:16). Specific questioning about the definitions could then follow: How helpful/precise are they? Are they too broad? Too narrow? This questioning process could be helped along by *observing* how words work. Students could be given a short text such as the following, where a number of different kinds of words (here highlighted) could be said in some or other sense to be "describing" or "limiting" nouns (more accurately, noun phrases):

> *"The Silence of the Lambs" both* ***appalls*** *and* ***enthralls****. It also* took *****seven nominations*****,** sees *its* ***female*** *star,* ***Jodie Foster,*** *who* plays *an* ***FBI*** *rookie who* tracks down *Hopkins in the* ***psycho thriller,*** *up for the* ***best actress*** *award.*

From here one could go on to the whole question of *classifying* linguistic concepts. The definitions given will be seen to depend on only two kinds of classification, i.e. notional and functional, and so students, now aware of the limitations of these kinds of definition, can be led on to set up morphological, syntactic, lexical-semantic and collocational criteria for adjectives. From there they could be encouraged to write their own new definition of what an adjective is. This would involve the act of *hypothesising*, and as students subsequently compare and criticise one another's definitions they would be into the business of *hypothesis testing*.

A number of benefits should flow from this kind of linguistics session. First, the students would quickly realise that the traditional approach to the so-called parts of speech, apart from its vagueness, presents a hopelessly simplified distortion of the linguistic realities. They would see that even their own much improved definitions could not cover all the data perfectly, that some adjectives could be regarded as prototypical in that they met all the criteria set up, but that there was a whole gamut, a cline of adjectivalness to be considered. They would, then, come to understand that there is a great deal more to language than meets the traditional eye, and if they had been able to enjoy the process whereby they came to this realisation, the chances are that they would want to do more of the same.

A second, related benefit of approaching the linguistic education of language teachers in this way would be that they would develop a clearer idea not only of scientific approaches to language, but of the process of scientific inquiry in general. Scientific inquiry would be demystified and revealed to be not some arcane, specialist concern, but rather to be a process we can and should all engage in, one in which, moreover, "[t]he quest for absolute certainty must be recognised as alien, [...] since scientific knowledge is fallible, tentative, and open to revision and modification" (Shore 1990:4).

The general educational potential of the science of language should not be underestimated. I think we can justifiably claim that linguistics is the "hardest" of the "soft sciences" in the sense that its object of inquiry - language - is both more readily accessible and more immediately complex than the object of inquiry of, say, sociology or psychology. As such, linguistics should be an excellent vehicle for the inculcation of a scientific attitude and scientific ways of behaving, particularly amongst language teachers and teacher trainees, BA students and, at a lower level, at least senior secondary pupils.

## The transference principle and the Transvaal Education Department

The topical relevance of what has been said so far is heightened by the Transvaal Education Department's directive (TED 1991) requiring (traditional) grammar to be reintroduced into the English first language Senior Certificate syllabus. In this document the most apparent of the misconceptions spawned by the Language Paradise Lost myth is the "knowing the parts of speech improves one's English" one. Let us call

this the **transference principle**, as it claims that explicit knowledge of the workings of the parts of speech transfers to improved language performance. The reader is assured that the TED is "not advocating a return to old-fashioned grammar", but rather seeks "to enable our pupils to use English as effectively and efficiently as possible. We earnestly believe that a start can be made by internalizing, understanding and using the rules of the language - those ones which we might term the 'nuts and bolts' of English" (TED 1991:1). At least one corollary to the transference principle is of course implicit here, namely a failure to appreciate that young adult first language speakers have internalised and been using all the "rules" in the language worth mentioning day in, day out for most of their lives, even if they don't consciously understand them. On the transference principle itself, the author of the document indicates that "we are aware that there is still some debate about the effectiveness of transference" (TED 1991:1), but again, "we strongly believe in this concept as a primary goal" (TED 1991:2).

One good reason why official documents such as these often fail to refer more pertinently to research on transference is quite possibly because practically every study undertaken so far indicates that this kind of transference just doesn't happen. It is interesting to note that Mitchell and Hooper (1992:45) found that even "a considerable number" of heads of English departments at a selection of British secondary schools felt that the relationship between grammatical knowledge and performance was, if anything, negative, "with grammatical analysis getting in the way of skill development". Mayher (1990:34) would agree with these teachers:

> From the 1890's to the present, study after study has been conducted to explore the direct instrumentality of grammar teaching. They have been conducted by people who believed there was a connection, and so it is likely that whatever biases they had would have tipped the balance in favor of grammar's instrumental role. And yet a connection has consistently failed to appear: in study after study the students who know their grammar best just don't write (or speak) any better than their less knowledgeable peers. In fact, if an effect shows up at all, it is usually slightly negative.

Mayher (1990:34) mentions a number of relevant research studies and reviews. More can be found in a various other sources, including Watson (1987). Thus Heath (1962), for example, compared a second form class which was given regular sentence structure, punctuation and vocabulary exercises, with another where pupils just read and wrote about their reading during those periods. After 10 months the first group scored higher only on a punctuation test, while the second group fared significantly better in the reading, spelling and composition tests. In one of the most carefully controlled research efforts to date, Elley *et al.* (1976) studied three matched groups of secondary school children over three years. One group had traditional grammar in its curriculum, one had transformational grammar, and the third had no grammar. After the three years the "no grammar" group did just as well as the other two on "writing and related language skills", but the transformational grammar group had the least positive attitude toward its English studies.

These findings appear on the face of it to be counterintuitive. This probably explains why there have been quite so many vain attempts to find some support for the common sense assumption that doing grammar should improve one's use of one's mother tongue. The empirical research presents us with an outcome that seems to be at odds with common sense, but it does not explain this outcome. However, even a cursory examination of what modern linguistic theories would predict with respect to the transference principle goes a good way toward providing us with an explanation, as Hartwell (1985), for example, has argued. Once again we can see linguistics as an activity that, in the best of interests, can subvert established, received ideas.

We shall limit ourselves here to aspects of modern linguistic views of the term *grammar*. With respect to our concerns we can identify three types of grammar: (a) the speaker's internalised, essentially unconscious system of rules - the *(grammatical) competence* of transformational-generative linguistic theory that underlies the speaker's *(grammatical) performance*; (b) the linguist's attempts to describe these rules; and (c) the school grammars of various pedigrees that have informed teaching in English grammar classes, such as those reported on in the empirical research that is at issue. Let us for the sake of convenience call our three types of grammar *internal grammar*, *linguistic grammar* and *school grammar* respectively.

The transference principle is an expression of the hypothesis: "Conscious knowledge of school grammar improves internal grammar." We saw earlier in the exercise with adjectives that the traditional approach radically simplifies and distorts linguistic realities, and this is apparent here too, in that it assumes that the two types of grammar are much more similar than they really are. In fact, as any linguistics student will know, modern linguistic grammars are highly sophisticated constructs, but even they all "leak" to some extent - in other words, none of them have succeeded in capturing perfectly even subsystems of the rules of the speaker's internal grammar. School grammars, whether derived from modern linguistic grammars or not, are a great deal leakier still. When we consider furthermore that the least leaky linguistic grammars developed so far are successful in the first instance as scientific models that account for language data, rather than as attempts to reflect or fathom the psycholinguistic processes of the internal grammar, we should be able to appreciate why modern linguistic theory would predict no link of any consequence between school grammar and internal grammar, i.e. no support for the transference principle.

Modern linguistic theories support the idea that spoken proficiency in the mother tongue is neither taught, nor learned, but acquired, in the sense that it develops naturally and unconsciously as a function of the interaction between the speaker's internal cognitive-linguistic mechanisms and the language to which he is exposed. Though writing, unlike speaking, is not a biologically determined form of behaviour universal to the human species (cf. e.g. Lenneberg 1967), and though a great deal has been written about differences between speaking and writing, we should not ignore the underlying similarities. Our theories imply that, once the physical mechanics have been taught, writing too improves largely in the manner of an acquired,

and not a taught, skill - by exposure to other writing and active involvement in the writing process (compare, for example experimental findings in favour of process-based writing courses, as reported by Daniels (1983:251)).

Having considered, then, that both linguistic theory and empirical studies reveal the transference principle to be a misconception, we must agree with Postman and Weingartner (1966:66) that, as far as past attempts at teaching grammar are concerned, "rarely have so many teachers spent so much time with so many children to accomplish so little".

**Grammar, linguistics and the English first language teacher**

The current attempt by the Transvaal Education Department to resurrect traditional grammar (and all its concomitant myths and misconceptions) is one event that points up the need for providing English first language teachers with a sound training in linguistics. I have focused here on a small but vital part of this training - the point of entry, where teachers are encouraged to examine and subvert traditional ideas about language. Crucial here is the method used - a need-driven, learner-centred induction into scientific ways of behaving about language issues.

The relevant language issue has been "Should we teach grammar in the first language classroom?" and the short answer to this question can now be seen to be "Only if we have sound reasons for wanting to do so" - reasons which have the support of arguments from linguistic theory, learning theory and empirical research. If high school children are encouraged to explore grammar in much the same way as I have suggested for teachers - as an enterprise involving properly *human* science rather than the incantation of sets of precepts - this will have both educational and enjoyment value (as evinced in, for example, efforts in this direction reported by Postman and Weingartner (1966)). If, on the other hand, the primary concern in teaching grammar is with the presentation of content - lists of grammatical terms and (often misleading) definitions - in the hope of thereby improving the effectiveness of students as writers, we are simply wasting precious time.

Language teachers, and the educationists who give them their brief, need to make informed decisions. This paper has tried to show how linguistics can inform decision making around the issue of grammar in the first language classroom. This happens to be both a perennial and a locally topical issue, but there are of course others that are at least as important, if not more so. Halliday (1982:14-15) too, has referred to linguistics as being subversive, and also uncomfortable, "because it strips us of the fortifications that protect and surround some of our deepest prejudices", and he suggests that "[m]ore than any other subject, linguistics forces us to face and acknowledge the multi-cultural nature of society and to do something about it."

English teachers, so critically important in the first language, the second language and the burgeoning multilingual classrooms of South Africa, must be given the opportunity to enjoy - and to build on from - the healthy intellectual discomfort that is part and parcel of this gently subversive subject.

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