Linguistics and Language Study

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From time to time, people maintain a distinction – sometimes even a conflict – between 'linguistics' and 'language studies'. Distinction, there certainly is. Conflict, I hope to show, there is not. Or (to be realistic), there should not be.

It is inevitable, I suppose, that the differences in orientation, tradition, and method between these two kinds of enquiry strike the casual observer as central, and lead quickly to judgements of irrelevance. Students of linguistics would not traditionally consider one of their primary aims to be the study of literature, institutions, and culture of a speech community; nor would those involved in German Studies consider one of their main aims to be the formulation of theories about human language, involving the consideration of the sounds, grammar, and vocabulary of languages unrelated to German. But scholarly interests change. In recent decades, several new branches of linguistics have developed which have as their main aim the integration of scientific language study within a broader cultural or social perspective – as reflected in such present-day course components as sociolinguistics, stylistics, pragmatics, and the ethnography of communication.[1] And, in terms of language studies, there is also evidence of a broader perspective being adopted, especially in relation to the tasks of language teaching and learning, which has led many teachers to sense the potential relevance of linguistic science, and to approach the subject, albeit warily.

One of the problems with the adjective 'linguistic', or the associated term 'linguist', is that the question of the investigator's professional background is left ambiguous. Students of linguistics and language studies are both entitled to call themselves 'linguists', but they mean somewhat different things by the term. Some have attempted to eliminate the ambiguity by referring to students of the former as 'linguisticians', but this coinage is disliked – and rarely used – by practitioners of linguistics. I am not sure, though, that I would welcome the introduction of a clear lexical distinction between those who wish to specialise in a specific language and those who wish to study language in general. It would draw attention to the differences between the two subjects, whereas I am strongly in favour of emphasising their complementary, and at times identical, interests. We will all be better linguists if, while maintaining our traditional identity, we each try to take into account the strengths of the other approach.

In the context of the present conference, we therefore have to ask: what are the strengths of linguistics, which can most profitably provide a perspective for German studies? I have elsewhere outlined several kinds of contribution which linguistic science has made to language study,[2] and two of these, the empirical and the theoretical, are best able to support the claim that there is some degree of identity of interest between the two fields.

The empirical contribution

The need for accurate descriptions of language's formal patterns and contexts of use is a prerequisite for progress, in either domain. There is a widespread impression that, for languages as well-studied as English and German, the facts are known, and all that remains is to find better ways of presenting and explaining these facts, in dictionaries, grammars, pronunciation guides, and manuals of usage. However, we are a long way from this happy state of affairs. Even in a field as well-established as lexicography, there are great gaps in our knowledge. We cannot but be impressed by the size and detail of such works as the Oxford English Dictionary and the Webster Third New International (or the corresponding major dictionaries in German), but a little comparative analysis shows that none of these dictionaries approaches the goal of a comprehensive description of the language. If we compare headwords between the OED and Webster, for example, it quickly emerges that the coverage is not identical – in fact, at times, the overlap can be as low as 70%. This is primarily because of the different aims of the two dictionaries: the historical orientation of the OED gives it an unparalleled strength in the coverage of older English words, whereas the Webster deals more in scientific and regional words. As new editions and supplements appear, of course, the differnces become less – but we are still some distance from the goal of comprehensive lexical coverage. Many regional varieties of English have still received very little description (some of the West Indian islands, for example, or the Philippines), and informal usage and local dialect variation (especially of the modern cities) is conspicuous by its absence – most dictionary projects still using only the written language (and often only the 'best' written language) to guide their selection of items for inclusion. There are similar problems with German.

Descriptive gaps appear in relation to pronunciation also. Here, I am not referring to the vowels, consonants, or syllable structure of English and German, where several standard accounts exist (at least, for the more formal varieties of speech – we still lack descriptions of the pronunciation changes which take place when speech is at its most informal, and where increases in speed of speaking lead to dramatic use of assimilations and elisions, posing predictable problems of listening comprehension for the foreign learner). The gaps lie, rather, in relation to the 'suprasegmental' dimension of pronunciation – the contrastive use of intonation, loudness, tempo, rhythm, and tone of voice, which add so much to the meaning of a message. Studies of English and German intonation have been made since the early decades of this century,[3] but there is still a great deal that is not understood, especially about the contexts in which particular suprasegmental patterns can be used, and the way intonation helps to organise the infrastructure of connected speech. Several teaching handbooks on English intonation still maintain, for example, the oversimplified view that *wh*- questions (such as *What's she doing?*) should be produced with a different intonation pattern from general questions (such as *Is it raining?*) – the former with a falling tone, the latter with a rising tone, whereas a modicum of observation of everyday speech demonstrates that the situation is much more complex.

However, the limited extent of our descriptive knowledge is most apparent at the grammatical level of language structure. Here, I am not referring to the basic patterns of grammatical structure, as found in the written language, about which a great deal is known (though even here, detailed studies continue to bring fresh facts to light, as can be seen in the pages of any linguistics journal), but to the way in which grammar works in everyday informal conversation, where relatively little research has been carried out. It is evident that the way we speak and the way we write are very different, but plotting the nature of the difference, and explaining it in terms of rules and tendencies of usage, is very difficult – partly because it is not easy to obtain good recordings of informal conversation for purposes of description. Analyses of English informal speech have however begun to indicate something of the way conversation is structured – for example, the use of 'comment clauses' (such as *you know*, *you see*, *I mean*, and *mind you*) and introductory items (such as *well*) turns out to be governed by a quite complex range of factors. Yet most grammars of English still make no reference to such things. The first systematic account of comment clauses was as recent as 1972, in the reference grammar by Quirk, *et al*, but that was only a 2-page outline; the 1985 reference grammar by the same authors fills out this description considerably, to nearly 6 pages (thus neatly demonstrating the way in which empirical data about language can grow, even in a decade).[4] I have looked for comparable descriptive information about the comment clause 'facts' of other languages, and do not find them. *Is* there a description of comment clause use yet available for German?

Examples could be multiplied (the use of participles, the position of adverbs, the order of adjectives ...), but perhaps there is no necessity. It is evident that there is a great deal of empirical work still to be done in the area of grammar, as well as in vocabulary and pronunciation. Moreover, the point is reinforced as we leave conversation study, and consider the range of varieties, or registers, which constitute the standard language as a whole. In the rapidly developing field of 'teaching for special purposes', there is a fresh focus on varieties of language, such as scientific, legal, medical, broadcasting, and journalistic, and a similar focus is often present in general language teaching, where there is interest in providing 'authentic' materials to help motivate a weary class. But such foci need to be supported by analysis of the linguistic patterns involved: what grammatical and lexical preferences are found in these varieties? what special problems of production or comprehension do they present? Descriptions of samples of these varieties are beginning to emerge, but we are nowhere near the goal of a comprehensive account ot the stylistic repertoire available to a language learner.[5] There are many varieties of German, as in English, where the rules and tendencies governing the use of structures have not yet been described.

As far as empirical work on language is concerned, then, I see no difference between the interests of the linguist (= linguistician) and linguist (= Germanist). Both are naturally concerned to establish a solid data-base of accurate data concerning the sounds, structures, and lexicon of a language. The difference comes in the *use* which the two groups make of their data, and this

requires a brief consideration of the theoretical aims of linguistics in relation to the study of an individual language.

The theoretical contribution

The most obvious difference between the two kinds of study is that linguisticians do not wish to restrict their enquiry to the facts of a single language, whereas Germanists do. But this difference, I want to argue, is not as divisive as it appears at first sight.

Linguists aim to establish the principles governing the use of language in general – to arrive at an account which will define the nature of human language. Linguists, in this context, begin by studying individual languages, and then developing hypotheses as to what the defining characteristics of a language might be (linguistic 'universals'), validating these views by referring to the structure of other languages. This is what makes a theoretical grammar (such as Chomsky's)[6] different from a reference grammar (such as Quirk's) or from any of the teaching grammars used in class: in the first case, the categories employed (such as 'Sentence' or 'Noun Phrase') are introduced in such a way that they are relevant to the analysis of *any* language; in the latter cases, the categories are set up only insofar as they are needed to account for the facts of a single language. In a reference or teaching grammar of English, therefore, certain grammatical notions may receive no mention at all, simply because they are not relevant for the description of the language (e.g. in English, the distinction between formal and informal second person pronouns, cf. German *du/Sie*), but it would not be possible to write a theoretical grammar without taking pronoun formality into account, because contrasts of this kind are found in many languages. Similarly, each language has its own norms of word order (e.g. whether the Subject typically precedes or follows the Verb); but in a theoretical grammar, an attempt needs to be made to define a 'basic' pattern of word order applicable to a wide range of languages, and to identify languages which are 'exceptions' to the general trend (for example, languages where Objects appear first in the clause, as in certain South American Indian languages).

At first sight, there seems to be a major difference in orientation here, which might well persuade language specialists that the theoretical aims of general linguistics remove that subject from their concerns. But this conclusion, I feel, would be wrong, for two reasons: one is based on the practical concerns of language teaching; the other has to do with the nature of language study, especially in the context of literature.

The first argument derives from the pressures which teachers (or students) face as they work their way through a foreign language syllabus. From time to time, questions will be raised which will go beyond the information available in the textbooks being used. Reference will be made to the teacher's intuition at that point – but again, from time to time, questions will be raised which intuition will be unable to solve (often, for example, to do with the frequency of use of a particular construction in a certain context). At this point, it is

necessary to rely on reference materials, such as a reference grammar or a reference lexicon (i.e. a dictionary). But satisfactory use of these reference works requires the mastery of independent principles. In the case of the dictionary, we need to have mastered the principle of alphabetical order and have learned how to spell – otherwise we cannot look things up. In the case of grammar, the situation is more complex, as there is no simple principle (such as alphabetical order) which can control the organisation of grammatical information. To look up a point in the 1800-page Quirk grammar, for example, we need to know more than how to use the index: we need to be aware of how that grammar is organised, what its major concepts are, and how they interrelate. In short, to be able to *use* a reference grammar, we must first be aware, at least in outline, of the structure of grammar, in a more abstract or general way. And the same point would apply whatever language the reference grammar was dealing with. The organization of a German reference grammar would make the same requirement of the user.

To summarise this first argument: the basic pedagogical task of establishing the facts to do with a question of language use is ultimately dependent on a more general awareness of linguistic structure and approach. We move from one linguistic perspective to another, almost imperceptibly. And the same conclusion is reached when we consider a second argument, which rests on the premiss that language study, of any kind, is essentially a *comparative* discipline. Language teachers, literary critics, academic linguists, and others are continually making comparisons – author A with author B, variety A with variety B, student A with student B, structure A with structure B, and so on. It is an unspoken assumption that the metalanguage and conceptual apparatus we use to handle the language on one occasion is in principle applicable to handle the language on another occasion. If students are taught standard German, and then encounter a German dialect, it is assumed that the same metalanguage learned to describe the former can be used to describe the latter. If they had been taught to use such terms as 'plosive', 'syllable', 'noun phrase', 'word order', 'case-ending', and 'synonym' in describing the first variety, we expect that they will continue to use them in describing the sound. To learn a fresh metalanguage would be otiose, and would make it very difficult to see similarities and differences between the two varieties. The same would apply if people were trying to see the difference between the German used in advertising and that used in newspaper reporting, or between the German used by one poet and that used by another.

There is a broader dimension to this argument, also, in that comparisons always have to be made between the target language and *other* languages. Whatever the language teaching approach adopted, the question of linguistic equivalence has to be addressed ('How do you say *x* in your language?'), and any attempt to generalise about the nature of '*x*' will, sooner or later, require metalanguage. Identifying points of difference between languages (as in a 'contrastive' approach) raises the question in its clearest form. Teaching German to someone with a Russian background inevitably leads to a focus on certain points of difference which would not arise if one were teaching it to someone with an English background (the difference in the use of the articles,

for example). And once again, there is a need for a metalanguage which can be applied with equal facility to both languages, to enable equivalences to be stated, and intellectual coherence to be maintained.

Linguistic metalanguage, in other words, is in principle independent of the dialect, variety, style, or even language one wishes to study. It is there, available for use, the product of 2000 years of historical tradition (for most of this terminology was developed by the phoneticians and grammarians of ancient Greece and Rome) and 200 years of scientific linguistic research. And it is something on which everyone relies, to a greater or lesser extent, with varying levels of accuracy and confidence. But metalanguage is not simply a matter of terminology. The terms are summaries of modes of reasoning, part of an overall conceptual apparatus, and they need to be interpreted and applied to specific cases. They should never be taken for granted. Just because two linguists or literary critics use the term 'noun' does not guarantee that they will be using the word in the same way: one person might include only 'common' nouns (*table, man*, etc.), whereas the other might include 'proper' nouns (*John, London*), de-adjectival nouns (*the rich*), and such words as *someone*. This kind of point is most apparent in literary study, when aspects of an author's style are being identified and compared. It is sometimes extremely difficult to see what the investigator means by the use of certain terms (from some current reading, I cull 'complex structure', 'deviant word order', 'dramatic rhythm', 'figurative expression', 'earthy idioms', 'concrete vocabulary', 'definitive adjectives', all used as part of the description of the language of a literary work, and all requiring further analysis before their application is clear). It will probably never be possible to eliminate all such ambiguities, but there is no doubt in my mind that progress will come only by a critical awareness of the criteria on which language terminology is based – an awareness which extends beyond one's particular language of interest, and involves an encounter with general notions of a linguistic kind.

For such reasons, I am unwilling to foster any rigid distinction between specialised fields of language study, such as the one represented by Modern German Studies, and linguistic science. There are certainly differences in aims and methods, but there is a great deal in common at an empirical, descriptive level, and it is here that I think the activities of linguistic scientists have most to offer. But there is a sequel. Empirical description does not exist in a vacuum: it rests on a foundation of theoretical reasoning. Some familiarity with this reasoning, and with the models of linguistic analysis which stem from this reasoning, is therefore a natural consequence for those who wish to enrich and systematise their descriptive awareness.

Notes

1   See R. Wardhaugh, *An introduction to sociolinguistics*, Oxford:Blackwell, 1986

2   D. Crystal, *Child language, learning, and linguistics*, London:Edward Arnold, 2nd ed. 1986, Chapter 1; *Linguistics*, Harmondsworth:Penguin, 2nd ed. 1985, Chapter 3

3   See E. Couper-Kuhlen, *An introduction to English prosody*, London:Edward Arnold, 1986, and A. Fox, *German intonation: an outline*, Oxford:Clarendon Press, 1984

4   R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, J. Svartvik, *A grammar of contemporary English*, London:Longman, 1972, pp. 778–9; *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*, London:Longman, 1985, pp. – . Several areas of grammatical neglect are dealt with in S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, J. Svartvik, *Studies in English linguistics*, London:Longman, 1980; see especially the papers by Bald, Crystal, Palmer, Svartvik.

5   A methodology is proposed in D. Crystal, D. Davy, *Investigating English Style*, London:Longman, 1969

6   A. N. Chomsky, *Syntactic structures*, The Hague:Mouton, 1957