The case for language analysis in schools

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This is a good week to be celebrating the achievements of the Linguistics Olympiad, following hard upon the UN's International Mother-Language Day on the 21st - a day chosen to remember the tragic moment in 1952 when student supporters of the Bengali Language Movement were killed by police in former East Bengal during a demonstration in support of their language (Urdu having earlier been declared the sole national language). The Day has been observed since 2000 to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism. It provides an opportune opening perspective for an event that aims to draw attention to the importance of language analysis and the need for its recognition in UK education.

International Mother-Language Day. Who knew? It is old news to language-aware attendees at the UKLO event, but if we were to ask passers-by in the streets outside the British Academy (or anywhere in the UK) we would find that most would have no idea that the 21st February had any linguistic significance. But thanks to a great deal of publicity over the past few years, many would these days be aware that the world is facing a language endangerment crisis. Estimates vary, but it is widely thought by language observers that around half of the 6000 or so languages of the world are so seriously endangered that they are likely to die out in the course of the present century. The forthcoming (2018) *Oxford Handbook of Endangered Languages* reviews the data and concludes that a language is dying out somewhere in the world every three months on average - a somewhat better estimate than the 'every two weeks' claim that used to be made, but a sobering assessment nonetheless.

What has language endangerment got to do with language analysis? There are two major aims of those concerned about the issue: documentation and revitalization, and both are dependent on analysis. Revitalization is the goal of many communities whose language is endangered, but for this to happen materials for teaching and learning need to be compiled, and these require a foundation that only a good linguistic analysis can provide. The languages need to be taught to new generations of potential users, and that means providing dictionaries, grammars, pronunciation guides, reading materials, and a range of other products that are taken for granted by users of 'successful' languages (such as histories, style-manuals, encyclopedias, and folklore anthologies). The basic task of devising a writing system remains a primary goal still for around a third of the world's languages.

Everything that is needed for a programme of revitalization is also needed in cases where all we can do, for the time being, is document the dying language. It should never be forgotten that, when a language dies, if it has never been written down, it is as if it has never been. But once it is recorded (on paper, using audio or video), then two immediate benefits are apparent. The language becomes 'available', should the time come when a community wishes to get its language back, even long after its last native-speaker has died (several cases of linguistic revival are known, not least in the UK with Manx and Cornish). And the individuality of the language is preserved for posterity. It is now well recognized that every language, through its cultural and cognitive singularity, gives us a unique vision of what it means to be human, and that the loss of any language is a loss to the whole world. As Dr Johnson observed: 'I am always sorry when any language is lost, because languages are the pedigrees of nations.'

Young people now come to the fore. In the endangerment literature, there is always a major focus on intergenerational transmission, for without this a language can disappear in a matter of decades. It is the teenagers who are the parents of the next generation of language users. If they do not become fluent and enthused about their community language, there is little hope for its preservation. And enthusiasm comes, not from simply knowing a language, but from knowing about a language - what in British educational history used to be referred to

as KAL (Knowledge About Language) - which in the present context, as we have seen in our Olympiad team, comes from what we are calling 'analysis'.

Without language analysis, endangered languages die. And what applies to endangered languages applies to all languages. The reason I start this talk with a focus on endangerment is to demonstrate that an analytical skill - the kind of skills we see in the Olympiad - is something that has real-life practical outcomes. Carrying out a linguistic analysis is sometimes viewed as an activity whose sole purpose is to provides the analyst with intellectual satisfaction - a crossword-puzzle mentality writ large - but it is far more than this. Language analysis is the indispensible foundation for a wide range of activities considered socially important, such as interpreting and translating, improving search assistance in online settings, carrying out forensic linguistic investigations, and providing diagnosis and therapy for children and adults with disabilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

There is also a moral imperative. None of the passers-by I referred to earlier would fail to be aware of the crisis facing the planet's ecology, in the form of the extinction of so many species of plants and animals, and nobody would doubt the central role played by botanists, zoologists, climatologists, and other environmental specialists in alerting the world to the existence of the crisis and getting something done about it. But it is the analyses made by these specialists that led to the diagnosis of the problem, and pointed the way towards its alleviation. Generating environmental awareness is a recognized part of the contemporary curriculum. Generating a corresponding linguistic awareness is just as important, and is conspicuous by its curricular absence.

One of the problems that linguists have to face, in working towards this goal, is that they have to spend an inordinate amount of time disabusing people of what language analysis is all about. To return to my passers-by: ask them what 'language analysis' means, and the overriding view would be that it is all to do with grammar. Press them on that point and they would talk vaguely about nouns and verbs, or subjects and objects, with many recalling a mechanical approach - a 'naming of parts' - whose relevance to their lives escaped them. Grammar for many of the older generation was solely a matter of being able to identify parts of speech and to parse a sentence. Some enjoyed it, but most found it dull, artificial, and purposeless. Removing this racial memory of old-style grammar, and replacing it by an account which shows that grammar, when taught well, is relevant, exciting, and fun, is the primary task facing language analysts. It can be done.

An analogy with learning to drive always comes into my mind, at this point. If I went to a driving school, I would expect the instructor to point out the various parts of a car - the accelerator, brake pedal, and so on - in my initial encounter. I might be tested: 'Which is the brake pedal?', 'Which is the indicator?' I might be grilled on the Highway Code. If I answered all those questions correctly, I would be somewhat taken aback if I was then told: 'Right. You can drive now'. Everyone knows that driving involves a great deal more, involving other skills, such as developing a sense of safe speed and a sensitivity to other road users. Above all, I need to be able to answer the question: Why do you want to drive? What do you want to use your car for? Where do you want to go in it? The thrill of driving comes partly from knowing that there are exciting places you can drive to.

I hope the analogy with grammar teaching is obvious. Traditional methods taught only the linguistic equivalents of the brake pedal, and tested them (today we would say: 'draw a circle around them'). If we can do that, then we are told we have 'learned grammar'. But of course we have hardly begun. We need to know, to continue the metaphor, what we want to use grammar for, where the interesting grammatical roads are, where we want to drive our grammar to. That is where the excitement lies. And to illustrate how this is done, I will tell you a story.

This is about Poppy, aged nearly ten, whom I met when I was giving a talk to an arts festival in Stratford-upon-Avon. I found myself sitting in a cafe area after my talk, and nearby was a teacher with a group of primary school children who had come to some sort of reading event put on by the festival. They were all clutching their favourite books. The teacher recognized me and told the children that there was 'Mr Grammar'., and she invited me over to talk to the children 'about grammar'. What should I do? I asked one of them, Poppy, why she

wanted to know about grammar. She was silent. So I asked her what she wanted to do most of all in her English work. 'I want to write like Terry Pratchett', she said shyly, showing me her copy of *The Carpet People*. 'Would you like to do that now?' I asked her, and she nodded vigorously. We had a look at his book. 'Do you know about adjectives and nouns?' I asked her. She certainly did. She had been drawing circles around them for ages. And she gave me some examples. A round table. A red car. The other kids chipped in too, so we soon had an example with several adjectives before the noun. I added one of my own. Would this be a good way to start a story? 'The old ruined house stood on the hillside'. They agreed it would. Then I asked Poppy: 'Which would be the better way to start the story: "The old ruined house stood on the hillside" or "The house, old, ruined, stood on the hillside".' 'Ooh', she said, 'the second one'. 'Why?' I asked her. 'It sounds creepier', she said. And indeed, everyone who hears those two sentences would affirm that putting the adjectives after the noun adds a note of atmosphere or drama that wasn't there before. 'Now let's look at Terry's book', I said. And within a few pages we found 'He saw the gleam of 10,000 eyes, green, red, and white'. Poppy loved that sentence. 'Let's rewrite Terry, I suggested: "He saw the gleam of 1000 green, red, and white eyes".' 'It's not so creepy', she said. 'So', I suggested, 'if you want to write like Terry, this is one of the things you can do. Put your adjectives after the noun. Go on, try it'. And she did, straight away creating a splendidly creepy sentence with her eyes shining.

Learning about grammar, for Poppy, was beginning to be fun. Of course, the story doesn't stop there. Poppy has to learn not to overdo it, by (her teacher later told me) putting *every* adjective sequence in a story after the noun! Balance in all things. But seeing the potential of what English grammar allows you to do is the first step. And what Poppy learned about adjective position she could learn about every other feature of grammar that the language has.

Note that to achieve such an outcome, grammar has to be placed in a broader language context. We have begun to talk about the meaning of sentences now, and their stylistic effect. Turning this into more technical metalanguage, we have placed grammar within a perspective of semantics (the study of meaning) and pragmatics (the study of the choices we make when we use language, the reasons for those choices, and the effects that the choices convey). If grammar is taught without those perspectives, it will remain mechanical and dull. When these perspectives are introduced, it becomes alive.

So, in short: why do analysis? There are five main reasons, over and above its intrinsic interest.

- It facilitates the processes of comprehension and production in all channels of communication (listening, speaking reading, writing - and not forgetting signing).
- It enables children to see how their various encounters with language across the curriculum (in science, history, literature...) exploit language in different ways and result in different effects.
- This prepares them for their public life as adults, for a good curriculum is a preparation for the way society compartmentalizes experience, and this will include coping with the language of the law, medicine, science, politics, journalism...
- But public life these days means far more than coping with the linguistic demands and expectations presented by English. In a post-Brexit world, there will be an increasingly pressing need to operate in other languages, such as when new trading relations are established, and we find ourselves in competition with other countries for whom the multilingual experience is a matter of course. The papers in Mike Kelly's *Languages After Brexit: How the UK Speaks to the World* (2018) should be required ministerial reading. As German chancellor Willy Brandt said years go: If I'm selling to you, I speak your language. If I'm buying, dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen!
- Then there is private life, alongside public life. People, in their personal lives, find so much of linguistic interest. I have never met anyone who is not to some degree fascinated by accents, dialects, the way children learn to talk, the origin of place-names, the meaning of first names and surnames, the history of words, and much more. The evidence? We need only look at the weekly headlines on the Internet, where every week - often every day - there are stories

that involve language analysis. Yesterday I spent a few minutes on Google, and found the following:

- A news item on the apostrophe - not in English, this time, but Kazakh, a language that is currently plannign to adopt a Latin-based alphabet. Last year the president insisted that certain sounds should be represented by apostrophes. Kazakh linguists furiously objected, pointing to the way repeated use of the apostrophe would break words up into chunks that would impede legibility. The president has now agreed to support the use of diacritics instead of apostrophes. Analysis makes news in the UK, even when it is a language that (to Britons) is little known.
- A news item on the way Google Assistant would have a further 30 languages available by the end of this year. Imagine the amount of analysis behind that claim.
- In the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail*, a report on the latest accent survey (by *Time Out*), in which people from around the world, speaking different languages, were presented with language samples and asked to say which was the sexiest one. Apparently English came top, with Irish and Scots accents also in the top ten (but not, sadly, Welsh).
- And then today, while waiting for this event to start, I glanced through the papers in the British Academy waiting room. In the *Telegraph* I read a story about how Alexa (Amazon's voice assistant) was in trouble for apparently allowing some swear-words (in song lyrics). In the *Times* I found a double-page spread on the future of English as a global language. In the *Guardian*, I saw the headline: 'Icelandic language battles threat of digital extinction'.

These five items illustrate the way a linguistic climate is regularly 'out there'. They wouldn't be there at all if the papers and websites didn't believe that there is a real public interest in language topics. So the question inevitably follows: why is this interest not routinely present in our school curriculum? Young people have no less interest in language topics than readers of the *Times* and the *Mail*. They are fascinated by what is going on linguistically across the Internet, in text-messaging, in accents and dialects, in child language acquisition, in the use of swearing, and much more. The A-level English language syllabus is full of these topics; the numbers who take that subject have grown greatly in recent years; and any teacher who teaches that subject will tell you of the interest it generates in class. If society takes language so seriously, both publicly and privately, and expects people to be able to use it and respond to it sensitively and creatively, with precision and clarity as required, and to be able to talk about language in an informed way, then why is this ethos not a fundamental part of the school curriculum?

Once upon a time (the 1970s to the 1990s), I thought this was going to happen, in the days of the Bullock Report, the Kingman Report, the Cox Report, and suchlike. Those were the days when we routinely encountered such watchwords as 'Language Awareness', 'Knowledge About Language', 'Language Across the Curriculum', and 'Languages Across the Curriculum'. I was really optimistic then that a new climate of linguistic awareness was emerging, in which analysis would play its essential creative part. And then something happened, and the clock turned back, and we now find children expected to do no more than name parts and 'draw a circle around a fronted adverbial'. Of course, good teachers can get round this by giving their charges a broader awareness, introducing the kind of excitement that Poppy appreciated so much, and I have seen many do so. But it should not be left to the individual to provide children with a grounding in language analysis. It should be a fundamental perspective in the curriculum, because all parts of the curriculum are ultimately dependent on a successful use of language. If a government minister were to see this, and to implement it, it would be one of the most significant steps forward in recent political linguistic history.

I remain moderately optimistic. There are several signs of progress in the formation of a new linguistic climate among the general (voting) population. I sense a growing public awareness of the language endangerment crisis, and especially an increased recognition of the roles of minority languages (and the need for their protection) which was not there a generation ago. In a multilingual and multicultural UK, it is hardly possible for it to be

otherwise. We see it also in the provision of language prizes and awards, such as those annually presented by the UK's Institute of Linguists or by Linguapax (though at an international level still nothing remotely resembling a Nobel Prize for Languages). We see it in the various projects for 'houses or museums of language(s)' - providing for language the equivalent of a Natural History Museum or a Science Museum. The main project in the UK, in the 1990s, supported by the British Council, nearly got off the ground, with a developed content schema, business plan, and even a building identified (opposite Shakespeare's Globe), until the funding disappeared when the government had a 'better idea' - the Millennium Dome. Other projects, such as the House of Language (Casa de les Llengues) in Barcelona, also foundered (in that instance, after an 8-year development project) when Spain found itself in economic difficulties. But there is good news on the horizon, in the form of Planet Word, which will open in downtown Washington in 2019. Perhaps one day we will see a British equivalent. And perhaps that outcome will come from the work and enthusiasm of the new generation of brilliant language analysts, some of whom are with us this evening. They represent the most positive sign I have seen in a long time of the emergence of a new linguistic climate. And for this we have to thank the founders of the Linguistic Olympiad.