

Remedial Syntax. By PHILIP CONN. John Horniman School Working Papers in Language Therapy, 1. Invalid Children's Aid Association Occasional Papers, 1. Pp. 59. London: JOINT COUNCIL FOR HANDICAPPED CHILDREN, 1971. 50p.

This is an impressive attempt to make explicit many basic assumptions about language therapy which have often been taken for granted, to look at them in the context of current discussion of theoretical and methodological issues in language acquisition studies, and to construct a detailed programme of syntactic development for remedial use. It is usefully and refreshingly critical about the principles and procedures involved; and to those who have attempted to construct a remedial syntactic programme for themselves, and who haven't got very far, the author's thorough working-out of his position will provide both a stimulus and a perspective. If used critically, recognising its limitations, it could be a useful tool for the treatment of many categories of disordered child.

Two themes are developed and emphasised in this booklet: pragmatism and flexibility. The author insists that remedial programmes ought to be evaluated primarily on the basis of whether they work or not; other considerations (e.g. a concern for theoretical explicitness) are important, but secondary. (He presents some evidence in passing to suggest that his own approach has had some success, pp. 27-9.). He also insists that if someone finds a particular programme unsuitable, then it ought to be altered; in his own work, for instance, he makes it clear from the preface that his proposed ordering of syntactic structures is not to be followed slavishly. These emphases are certainly worth bringing out at the present time. It is fashionable to demand theoretical and methodological explicitness as prerequisites for any remedial work; but if taken literally, this is a position which leaves little time for any practical work at all. And flexibility is certainly a gospel worth preaching, as there are still many who adhere rigidly to a teaching manual (whether of pronunciation, or syntax, or whatever), forgetting that its norms and gradations are only as satisfactory as the frame of reference which its authors used in their derivation.

The danger with a philosophy of flexible pragmatism is that, unless it is rigorously controlled and explicitly principled, it will rapidly degenerate into inconsistency and vagueness; and in my opinion, this booklet does not escape these dangers.

One of the cardinal points about a scientific approach to language is that one should know exactly what one is doing at any time. Reasons should be given for any analytic decisions, and arbitrary, unmotivated judgments minimised. Now I accept that Mr. Conn's approach can be successful; but because, at a number of crucial places, he gives no reasons for the way in which he deals with language, the overall impression at the end of the booklet is an uncertain one. For example, it is said (p. 12) that 'The simplest type of well-formed sentence is the simple active affirmative declarative'. Why? On p. 13, it is stated, *inter alia*, that 'we wished to introduce aspects of the rule of number and tense as early as possible. We wished also to give maximum emphasis to the varying forms of "to be"'. Why? Why? The therapist must be told, if this information is to be used effectively. Otherwise, such comments as 'both of these aspects (*sc* of syntactic form) might be introduced sooner, if it were thought

necessary or useful' are vacuous, for what are the criteria of necessity or utility that the therapist should be bearing in mind? It is all very well permitting people to be flexible; but unless one tells them how, they will not get very far towards producing an alternative model that is meaningful and self-consistent.

In the only place where the author does go into explanations of criteria, he is extremely vague. On p. 13, he says: 'The rules divide roughly into two kinds, the division being made on *the criterion of semantic effect*' (my ital.). But what is this? (And why roughly?) He goes on: 'For example, rules of tense *seem more important* than rules for the substitution of demonstratives' (my ital.). But seems to whom? On what grounds? Making this intuition explicit is crucial, but no attempt is made to do so here. The only clarification given to the notion of 'importance' has nothing to do with semantic effect at all, namely, the 'optional' rules, p. 13, (i.e. rules which are dependent for their operation on other rules are also less important). Without any amplification, phrases such as 'major syntactic variation' (p. 12) are meaningless, as are statements such as 'we have selected the *most necessary* rules for producing and comprehending the *most basic* English syntactic forms' (p. 13, my ital.). The need to motivate one's selection and grading of structures is of course the crux of the matter in any remedial work. My criticism of this booklet is not that no such motivation is given – for this is not a feasible requirement in the present state of knowledge about linguistic complexity – but that the author does not present an account of the difficulties involved in making any decisions of this kind. Silence on this point is positively misleading.

The author's own principles are, he states, 'structuralist' – by which he seems to mean the kind of linguistic analysis practised by Fries and others in the early fifties. He adopts this position because it is more practicable in remedial work than an approach based on generative theories, and also because he finds the latter position unsatisfactory in various of its theoretical claims. His criticisms of the competence/performance distinction and the language acquisition device of Chomsky may be new to some, and should be carefully considered. It is a pity, in a way, that the author feels it necessary to spend so much time taking the generative position into account, seeing as he is going to make no use of it: some of this space could usefully have been used in developing the basis of his own position, which is presented in the merest outline. As it is, a great deal that the reader would like to know is not there.

For example, he does not develop the point, which should have been clearly made, that in taking over the insights of the structuralist approach, you inevitably take over its weaknesses. There is one particularly pervasive issue here, namely, the concept of word-class, which is basic to his approach. He says (p. 12): 'It is well known that the form-classes in a language are defined descriptively in terms of the substitution possibilities of lexical items'. Yes, but it is also well-known what difficulties there are in this approach – see the critique of substitutability in Quirk's paper, for instance (*Archivum Linguisticum*, 1957) – and the therapist ought to be made aware of the limitations and the artificialities introduced by using this method. It emerges, for example, that word-classes are not the neat, homogeneous, clear-cut entities implied by the use of a system where nouns, verbs, etc., are all given different colours (cf. p. 19, ff.). Words are grouped together because they behave similarly in sentences; and depending on how similar in behaviour you feel two words to be, so you will either group them as a single class, or put them into different classes. Thus Conn considers proper names to be a different class from nouns. He may be right to do this, but as many other scholars think differently, and consider them to be a sub-class of noun, we would like to know why this particular line is taken here. Likewise, why are proper names and pronouns placed together here? Why are 'this' and 'that' adjectives and not articles, in terms of substitutability? And so on. Of course there is no one universally-applicable answer to such questions: very often one has simply to make an arbitrary decision and stick to it. My point is that the way in which *any* decision was arrived at must be made clear, and this the author does not do.

Finally, I am worried by the strange admixture of traditional grammatical attitudes with this structuralism. It shows itself partly by the use of odd terms (e.g. 'aorist' tense, p. 18; the simple v. progressive aspect distinction referred to as a difference of 'tense'; the cavalier use of 'etc.' to fill out paradigms, p. 18); but more fundamentally, it emerges in the way that a large number of unacceptable sentences are produced by using the descriptive apparatus mechanically, just as traditional grammars did. The following sentences are all used in the drills in the remedial programme: 'what is the boy doing quickly and quietly?' (p. 35), 'Jack and Gill are washing Jim and Jane' (p. 36), 'What are these and those flowers doing?' (38), 'What is no boy?' (p. 42), and many more. This of course is part of the point of doing remedial work in a perspective of *normal* language development: one sees quickly how unimportant or unlikely such structural types are.

Mr. Conn expresses the hope that small, frequently-held, inter-disciplinary conferences will take place as a means of disseminating knowledge of this field, and improving remedial practices. This can help, but it is no solution. I chaired one such group set up by the Spastics Society a few years ago (defunct now, due to lack of funds): it did disseminate much knowledge, but little of any practical value came out of it. It seems that interdisciplinary discussions are no substitute for the real hard work of committed individuals, such as Mr. Conn and his colleagues. It is quite clear that a great deal of work has gone into the booklet under review. I do not myself think that the author has gone sufficiently deeply into his underlying linguistic principles; but he has gone far deeper than most people dare to go, and made many interesting suggestions along the way. Given the choice, I would rather read his paper than attend an inter-disciplinary conference.

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