2.1 The Related Theory Applied

Practical people are suspicious of theory, of knowledge ‘its own shake’. They want to know how:

→what button to push, and

→what to do here and now.

But a good student, or a first year student, is not satisfied to know the tricks of the trade.

→He wants to know why.

→He wants to understand what he is doing.

This way he is prepared to handle new situation and new problems, not only those for which there are tried-and-true rules of thumb. He can look at ‘practical’ advice given by others, and judge whether it make sense.

Grammar provides the students with a theory of how language works. It helps us understand how sounds combine into words, and words into sentences, to express an infinite variety of facts, observations, opinions, and feelings. A knowledge of grammar helps us use language with some sense of what we are doing, and why. It helps us understand practical advice about language, and it helps us decide whether the advice is soundly based.

The decisions we make when we are carrying out some sort of practical task are consciously or unconsciously influenced by the views we hold about the nature of the thing we are dealing with. Everyone has what we can call an informal theory about language and, if they are teachers of
language, about how it is learned. The theory is informal, because it is not explicit—that is, expressed in a strictly logical form—and consequently may well contain hidden inconsistencies and contradictions. In this sense, it is unscientific. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that everybody holds several informal theories about language, part of one theory being inconsistent with parts of another. Language is a very complex thing, and it cannot yet be fully accounted for by anyone within one wholly consistent and comprehensive theory. Certainly linguists have found it so. For this reason, when asked the question What is language?, the linguist is likely to reply by asking another question Why do you want to know? If we teach language, the way we approach our task will be influenced, or even determined, by what we believe language to be, by the particular informal theory or theories we have about it which seem to be relevant to the particular problem we are faced with.

There is generally a close connection between the way we talk about something and the way we regard it. The language we use about it betrays our views on what it is. If we want to know what someone believes language is, we must listen to the language he uses to talk about it. If we do this we soon notice that people seem to hold at one and the same time incompatibleviews about its nature. For example, we regularly hear people talking larly hear people talking about 'using language': He used some awful language; He used a word I didn't understand; What use is Karonese? This suggests that language is an object like a tool, which we can pick up, use for some purpose and put down again. People sometimes even actually call
language a tool. We also talk about people possessing a language. Now, if language was solely regarded as behaviour of a particular sort this would be a strange way of talking about it. Can we talk about walking in the same way? Can we say that we use 'walking to get somewhere? or acquire', 'possess' or 'lose' walking?

Linguists, especially, often talk about how language 'works', as if it were an 'object like an alarm clock, whose functioning could be understood from a study of its internal structure of springs and cogwheels. It is significant that while a study of the internal structure of a clock will tell you how it works, it won't tell you what clocks are for. This notion of internal structure evidently lies behind such statements as: This sentence has a complex structure or, in teaching, the phrase: Learning a new construction. Although we typically think of mechanisms as being lifeless objects, we frequently refer to language as if it were a living organism. We speak about the 'birth' of a language, of its 'growth', 'development' and 'decline'. Languages have periods of 'blossoming' and 'flowering' (always in the past); they are related to each other in 'families', or 'descended' from each other. They are 'living' or 'dead'. They also have physical and moral qualities; they are 'beautiful', 'ugly', 'vulgar', 'debased' or decadent'.

I am not seriously suggesting that people actually believe that language is a concrete object which can be handled physically like a tool. These ways of talking about language are metaphorical. But it is interesting that we have to resort to metaphor to talk about language at all. The metaphors all have this in common though, they all treat language as an object.
We also find people talking about language as an 'event'. A conversation 'takes place', words 'crop up' in a discussion. We even speak about someone's speech as the event of the evening.

Language is something we know. We ask someone if he 'knows' English or Karonese, or if he knows some words or others. It is also something we 'do'. We write, read, speak well or badly. In this case we are treating it as skilled behaviour which we have to learn, and which improves through practice.

After the general discussion about ways of regarding language in the preceding chapter, it might be thought surprising that anyone has been brave enough to attempt a definition of anything so complex. In spite of this there have been innumerable such attempts, none of them wholly satisfactory or comprehensive. But most of them in one way or another try to work into the definition some statement about the function of language, usually in the form of such phrases as: by which man communicates; a system of communication; for the purposes of communication. In the last chapter the notion of language as a means of communication was regarded as a sociological way of looking at language, since it involved taking into account speaker and hearer as well as many other features of the speech situation. I shall here go a little further into this matter of the communicative function of language. First of all, we have to make a distinction between intentional and unintentional communication. If we see a friend walking along the road, unobscured by him, we may be able within fairly broad limits to draw certain conclusions
about him, his state of mind or health, where he is going and why, just from the way he is walking. In this sense his walk 'tells' us something, but no one would suggest that he is walking in that way in order to communicate with us, though this may sometimes be done. All our behaviour is in some measure communicative, in the sense that the 'receiver' learns something he didn't know before, even though the 'sender' has no specific intention of informing him of anything.

But we are not born speaking and understanding language. We have to acquire it, so this approach to language is not only concerned with what goes on when we speak and understand, what has been called linguistic performance, but how we come to be able to do these things. Language behaviour is evidently such a complex skill that it seems almost incredible that it can be acquired by an infant in such a short time.

2.2 Contrastive Linguistics

Different languages vary considerably, therefore, in the degree to which they differ from each other. It is not only, however, a matter of degree but one of kind. Indeed, while speaking of languages as differing from each other to varying degrees is a common-sensical way of talking, there is, at present, no way of measuring the degree of differences in a rigorous or valid fashion. The most obvious way in which differences between languages show themselves is in the mutual intelligibility of their speakers; but here we must remember what was said in the previous paragraphs, that mutual intelligibility was not just a function of the linguistic relation between languages, but also had an
important socio-psychological component. The other way in which the
degree of differences between languages is apparent is in the degree of
difficulty the speaker of one has in learning another. Here also we must
admit that it is a matter of subjective judgement. The ease or difficulty of
learning something is not simply related to the nature of the task but has
components of motivation, intelligence, aptitude, quality of teaching and
teaching materials; more importantly it depends upon the expecta-
tions the learner has of success. Certain languages may be considered
difficult to learn by members of a certain community. By being thought
difficult they may became difficult. Believing oneself no good' at some-
thing is the surest condition for failure. As in the case of mutual intelli-
gibility, so in the case of difficulty of learning second languages too
there is an important socio-psychological factor.

Determining the formal similarities and differences between
languages is something that has been central to linguistic studies in the
past, notably in nineteenth-century Europe, under the title of compa-
rative philology. The object of this study was to establish was the
comparison between English and Karonese. The possessive pronouns
between languages on the basis of their manifest similarities, or more
generally correspondences, particularly between the forms of words
having similar meanings. From these studies developed the notions of
language families, groupings of languages which were more or less
distantly related on the grounds of having developed over time from
common origins. These studies represent the approach to language
referred to the forms and functions and were principally concerned to elucidate the nature of linguistic change.

There can be no question of, say, 'comparing English and Karonese'. Each language is a complex of a large number of patterns, at different levels and at different degrees of delicacy; a 'system of systems', in a well known formulation. There can be no single general statement accounting for all of these, and therefore no overall comparative statement accounting for the differences between two languages. One may be able to compare, for instance, the pronouns group of English with the pronoun group of Karonese.

In linguists' words, however, there is the implication that difference and difficulty are synonymous. This is by no means self-evident. Indeed, many teachers will have been glad to find that what was identified as a difference and predicted as a difficulty turned out not to be so.

Because a particular feature of the target language is different from the mother tongue it does not necessarily follow that it is difficult to learn. We must nevertheless assume that taken overall the time needed to learn a second language reflects the degree of differences there is between it and the mother tongue. I repeat the qualification taken over all, since it seems to be the case that we cannot assert that any particular feature of the target language which differs from the mother tongue is necessarily inherently difficult to learn. Indeed, there is evidence that something totally 'new' or different may prove easier to master than something which is only slightly different; for example, where a very similar sound
exists in the two languages but in different phonetic environments, there may be a greater learning problem than in the case of a totally new sound. It would be wise, at this point, simply to note that difficulty is clearly a psycholinguistic matter, whereas difference is linguistic, and until we can relate the two ‘measures’ in some principled fashion we can only note the overall relation between difficulty and difference, but not measure the psycholinguistic learning difficulty of particular linguistic differences.

Similarities between languages (English and Karonese possessive pronouns) may be very general or abstract on the one hand, or superficial and trivial on the other; they are generally only partial, rarely complete. For example, the English learner cannot by inspection immediately discover that the number system of Karonese is similar to that of English; namely, a two-term system in which all possessive pronouns. The reason is that the system of marking plurality in Karonese is very different from English. Whereas English marks plural nouns with $-s$ or $-es$ with only few exceptions, Karonese has system of plural marking, it is only by inserting the numbers of the plural nouns.