Landmarks

Discourse Analysis and the Project of English Language Learning

Yasmeen Lukmani

Introduction

Let us begin by asking a basic question: What do you mean by saying, 'I know French'? Do you mean that you can pass an exam in French? Or, do you mean you can carry on a conversation in French? In other words, does knowledge of a language mean to you a focus on the production of correct sentences as such? Or, does it mean, the ability to communicate with reasonable fluency and intelligibility in speech and in writing? In practice, what you are likely to mean, for example, is whether you can ask your way to a railway station in Paris in French. However, most tests of French are likely to measure you on the ability to produce sentences involving certain verb forms or the agreement between the sentential subject and object or other features of grammar that are perceived as crucial to correct production. These tests are inevitably in the form of isolated, fully formed sentences which are not part of a context, whether in speech or writing. High scores on such tests will not ensure that you can make the jump to ask your way to a railway station or understand the answer to that question, when conversing with a monolingual French speaker in Paris. This approach to testing, with its basis in a similar approach to teaching, can lead to a mismatch between the certificate of proficiency you might have received and the ability to communicate in real life contexts.

So, what is language– a set of rules for the correct use of grammar and phonology, or is it a means of communication? It is only on the basis of our answer to this question that we can set up appropriate courses for teaching French, or any other language, for that matter.

The Legend

Till about the 1970s, it was widely believed that training in grammar was the only basis for correct production, even though there were notable exceptions to this belief. Around that time, however, with the advent of Chomsky, the field of linguistics underwent a sea-change. Chomsky, of course, believed that language was grammar (or more narrowly, syntax), and went so far as to postulate that a particular section of the mind was dedicated, from birth, to the development of syntax. This mental ability was responsible for generating the syntactic base of the first language, (something which emerges automatically, without training, given exposure to the language) through the mind of the growing child. This section of the mind, or mental ability, Chomsky called the 'Language Acquisition Device'.

Chomsky's ideas took the intellectual world by storm, and Linguistics became one of the most exciting areas to be working in. An offshoot of the study of Linguistics and the search for a Universal Grammar, was the study of Psycholinguistics, which looked at the way in which the Language Acquisition Device made the child learn the different rules of grammar according to its emerging agenda of rules. The deep structure of all languages seemed to show marked similarities, and this was further

corroborated by the fact that similar items across languages were learnt by children at approximately the same age. Certain items were always learnt earlier, regardless of language, e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives, while items difficult not just for foreigners but also for native-speaking children, such as prepositions and articles (in the case of English and German), were acquired much later.

The English Language

This goes against traditional beliefs regarding the grammatical items to be introduced early in the teaching system. For example, in the case of English, the native English-speaking child always acquires the present continuous tense (though without the accompanying auxiliary, e.g., 'I going home') before the simple present. As it happens, so does the second language learner. This has much to tell English language teachers, particularly in India, for they are ready to pledge their souls on the simplicity and therefore the teachability of the simple present tense, first of all, and sometimes only that tense, during the first year of English teaching. The present continuous is delayed till much later. The fact that the simple present tense has several different meanings all conveyed by the same form, which is confusing in itself, does not occur to them. To add to it, it conveys complex meanings, such as the statement of a general truth as in, 'The sun sets in the West'.

Sociolinguistics

Simultaneous to the revolution in Linguistics and the development of the vibrant new area of Psycholinguistics, another related study, that of Sociolinguistics, which led in a somewhat different direction, was also developing. Sociolinguistics is the study of language in its social context. At the macro-level, it deals with the role of language(s) in society, but at the micro-level with which we are concerned, it attempts to place instances of language in their social context. So, in the use of language we are concerned not so much with correctness, but with appropriateness of use. It involves issues of politeness, body language, how we stand, how we sit, who enters the room first, which are all concerned with newly developing areas like kinesics (e.g. can I cross my legs when talking to you; can I gesticulate?) and proxemics (e.g. how close to you can I stand without your feeling uncomfortable?)

Sociolinguistics has allowed the study of language to come out of the closet, out of the straitjacket in which it had been imprisoned by our dedicated and well-meaning language teachers. Context has a number of features, some of which have been identified: Participants, Medium (Spoken/ Written), Place, Time, Occasion and so on. The language used will differ depending on whether it is spoken or written; the nature of the participants, whether equals or superior-inferior; the time of day: in the middle of the night, utterances which might be normal in the daytime, take on added meaning; the place: is it a classroom, someone's home, the street; the occasion: is it a formal gathering, an informal getting together, or an intimate moment for two? There are several other features but this will suffice to give you the general scope of the context of speech situation.

Text and Context

But aside from the social context, there is also the textual context, or as Halliday calls it, the 'co-text'. The framework of syntax is concerned only with the sentence and its internal relations. It is not concerned with how it relates to other sentences that precede or follow it, its place in the text, or what the tone of voice is in which it is said. Sentences when they occur in text are not necessarily complete sentences. For example, consider this:

'He didn't follow my advice. Not only that. What he did was much worse. He fell into the trap that was laid for him and dragged me in as well.'

In this piece of text, sentence 2 is not a complete sentence - It has no verb - it just occurs between two full stops, one of the features of a sentence. But it is by no means incorrect. So, utterances in a text do not necessarily follow the norms of correct sentence production. We give learners the wrong impression if they are not taught to recognize this.

We have to realise that sentences are formal in nature, i.e., they have to consist of verbs, nouns, etc. in the order required for the language in question. But they are not only 'formal', they are also, and necessarily, 'functional', i.e., the production of a sentence leads to some statement of meaning and even beyond that, to an exchange of meaning between at least two participants in the conversation. The statement of meaning is its textual purpose. The exchange of meaning between participants in a language situation is its contextual purpose.

Language necessarily has a purpose. It is produced in order to convey something. In order to do this, it has to hold together the idea being conveyed by means of connectedness of sub-ideas, the connections being linguistically signaled by cohesive links like 'however', 'nevertheless' and so on. And, of course, coherence and clarity has to be established within the whole text. There is no point in language existing for its own sake– it is not an object to be admired on its own. It exists in order to convey meaning, and therefore we must try to enable people to convey meaning as clearly and as unambiguously as possible. That should be the goal, whether it is through correct sentence production, or otherwise; the goal, the purpose of language, is to communicate and communicate effectively.

Discourse Analysis

It is for this reason that offshoots of Sociolinguistics developed: Text Analysis and Discourse Analysis. Sometimes the two terms are used synonymously, but most useful and least confusing is to think of Text Analysis as dealing with the textual aspect, i.e., the grouping of ideas and their inter-connections, which involve linguistic connections, and Discourse Analysis, as dealing with language in its social context for purposes of communication.

Issues in Textual Analysis are, 1) forms of linguistic connection, or cohesion, and also, 2) forms of inter-relatedness of ideas, or coherence.

Issues in Discourse Analysis are wider in scope, because it deals with all of communication. It is concerned with how the intention of the speaker is conveyed to the listener, the presuppositions in the minds of each participant, which may or may not help in getting the meaning properly conveyed. For example, if I think you are trying to fool me, then I won't take your words at face value, so communication is skewed. It is concerned with choice of words, tone of voice, any background knowledge about the speaker/ listener that is available, and other aspects of the speech situation.

It is clear that the approach to language as communication leads both into the minds of the participants as well as into the socio-cultural aspects of their language encounter. This is the reality of the situation in which language is used, and one must realize that the relatively confined area of syntax provides more clear-cut answers as to correctness than the expanded scope of 'text', and wider scope still, of 'context'. It can be argued that syntax, which deals with language form, is a smaller area to learn and can be generalized over all texts and contexts. That may be so, but one has also to learn to generalize over what is appropriate in different textual genres (e.g., description, argumentation,

report writing, dialogue) or different language situations (e.g, frozen, formal-informal, intimate), i.e., to handle language function.

Ultimately, it is a question of whether one wants to generate any sentence at all, following the rules of grammar, however nonsensical, like, for example,

'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously' (courtesy Chomsky),

or whether one wants to communicate sense, even if before we reach full native-speaker like ability, the syntax is faulty or only just reasonably correct, to generate understanding.

The best language learners we have are children learning their native tongue. By puberty, they will have learned all the major aspects of syntax; it is only vocabulary which goes on expanding through life. So, children go through a long period of time, even in learning their mother tongue in which they lack complete control of many aspects of syntax. The extensive research on second language (L2) learning shows that the learning procedures of L2 learners are roughly similar to those of L1 speakers. It is felt that when language is learnt in context, the going is easier and the effects much more likely to last.

If the goal of language learning is to make sense in the second/ foreign language, to be intelligible, then it is advisable to teach learners the language in this manner, rather than teach them the syntax and expect them to communicate in the language later. Our experience of learners in the educational system tells us that language learnt with emphasis on syntax is rarely learnt or put into practice. It is only meant to get them to pass an examination.

An Example

If one is prepared to get learners to be meaning-focused rather than language-focused, there are a number of exercises one can try. I have space for only one exercise for the teaching of writing. You can develop any number of such exercises on your own, once you start thinking along these lines.

1. Developing connections between 2 sets of sentences. Ask the students to come up with any number of sentences they can think of. Put all these indiscriminately into two columns on the blackboard. Now ask them to combine one sentence from Column A with another chosen from Column B, with an appropriate marker of linkage. You can put up on the board markers like **however, but, so, therefore** and other such words. Suppose these are your two columns:

Column A	Column B
I don't like going to school	My mother forces me to study
I like watching movies	I hate doing homework
I love my dog	I like cycling
I am tired of sitting at home in the holidays	I want to climb trees
I am feeling hot	I try to call my friends over
	I put on the fan

You should normally have a much longer list, but let us see how we can combine these.

1. I don't like going to school **because** I hate doing homework.
2. I like watching movies **but** my mother forces me to study.
3. I love my dog **and** I like cycling.
4. I am tired of sitting at home in the holidays, **so** I try to call my friends over.
5. I am tired of sitting at home in the holidays, **instead** I want to climb trees.
6. I am feeling hot **so** I put on the fan.

Now ask them what the relationship is between the two sentences that have been combined, in each case.

In no. 1, a reason is given for a statement.

In no. 2, two opposed things are brought together.

In no. 3, two things are combined which evoke a similar response.

In no. 4, the second activity is a result of the learner's dislike of the first.

In no. 5, opposition between the two activities is shown.

In no. 6, the second activity is a consequence of the first statement.

Making learners aware of these types of relationships will make them understand what is being said or written, and generate in them the desire to produce them on their own. Don't worry too much if the sentences they produce are incorrect. If they don't make sense because of the incorrectness, by all means change that part of the sentence before writing it up on the board, but otherwise, put them up as they are, so learners won't mind volunteering to give sentences. That is much more important. They must learn to produce sentences or pieces of text on their own, and feel that they are capable of doing this. Correctness will come with practice. They themselves will become aware of the need for correctness once they have the confidence to produce words on their own. This confidence is fundamental, so don't crush them by saying that all that they've produced is wrong. Putting up incorrect sentences that they have produced will not do them any harm or reinforce incorrectness, in fact, it will encourage them to do better next time.

It is with great hopes that I have written this piece, the hope that you as the reader will become the innovator who will put these ideas into practice and revolutionise English teaching in particular and language teaching in general if the similar idea were followed in teaching any other language. Perhaps then there will still be hope that our classrooms will produce students who can actually speak, read, write and understand English or the language they are trying to learn in real contexts of use, with clarity, intelligibility and appropriateness. It is now in your hands.

Yasmeen Lukmani retired as Professor of English from the Universty of Mumbai, Mumbai. Her interests include syllabus design, materials production, and teacher training.

ylukmani@gmail.com