

H.G. Widdowson. *Explorations in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. 273 pp. Paperback, R9,85.

Linguists and teachers will welcome this collection of papers on applied linguistics by Professor Widdowson of London University, whose work in the field of communicative language teaching is becoming increasingly well known.

The book makes accessible twenty of Professor Widdowson's papers on the subject, written for presentation at courses and Seminars between 1971 and 1979. The papers are divided into eight sections, each organized around a focal topic. The sections are:

- 1: *Prelude*
- 2: *English for science and technology*
- 3: *Exercise types*
- 4: *Discourse*
- 5: *Procedures of interpretation*
- 6: *Simplification*
- 7: *Descriptions and applications*
- 8: *Reprise*

In an introductory comment, Professor Widdowson identifies the primary thrust of the articles in each section. This provides the reader with a useful perspective, considering that the papers cover some eight years, during which the author's approach to the teaching of language developed in line with advances made by other linguists.

Other useful features of the book are the extensive bibliography (170 entries) and the brief introduction to the volume as a whole. The bibliography is essential for any reader not well-acquainted with recent research in the field of applied linguistics, as frequent reference is made to the work of other linguists. These are not always extensively quoted, and the uninformed reader might be unable to evaluate the author's assessment of them without at least some background reading.

The introduction identifies the scope of the book as 'applied linguistics' and the purpose as 'exploration'; hence the title. Applied linguistics as Professor Widdowson conceives of it is 'a spectrum of enquiry which extends from theoretical studies of language to classroom practice' (p. 1), so that the papers included in the book cover both theory and pedagogy — with varying degrees of emphasis; but always 'the whole spectrum is presupposed as the context of discussion'; 'considerations of theory' are therefore 'linked to pedagogic relevance and demonstrations of practical teaching procedures are linked to theoretical principles' (pp. 1-2).

Professor Widdowson does not present his theory as conclusive or his practice as prescriptive. Instead, he stresses the exploratory nature of the papers, referring explicitly in his introduction to the quotation from T.S. Eliot which appears on the title page of his book:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

(*Little Gidding*)

Widdowson wants the teacher of language and the linguist alike to approach their tasks with the flexibility, the responsiveness to situation, that characterizes language itself. He attacks the abstractness, idealization, standardization — in short, the de-contextualization and therefore the irrelevance — of much of 'recent formal linguistic inquiry' (p. 115). Like Searle and Labov, he considers the very features of language disregarded by many theorists — notably its variability and adaptiveness — to be of primary importance.

Perhaps what he most objects to in formalized linguistic descriptions is the way they appeal to the bandwaggoning instincts of students of linguistics, who are inclined to adopt them uncritically as ultimate truths. He writes:

No model of language has the monopoly on truth ... All descriptions, no matter how apparently objective they might appear, are really only projections of personal or social attitudes.

(p. 239)

In this connection Chomsky, who attracts a considerable amount of negative comment in the book, is alleged to 'equate human beings with automata' (p. 240).

In warning against uncritical marching behind popular linguistic banners, the book does not disregard the opposite fault: that of casual eclecticism: 'Eclecticism should not serve as an excuse for irresponsible *ad-hocery* as it sometimes has in the past' (p. 243). He advocates a responsible and selective awareness and application of linguistic theory, directed always by the primary goal of fostering communicative competence — that is, the ability to use English to perform such rhetorical acts as defining, discussing, exemplifying, rather than merely to manipulate its structures in an artificial classroom setting.

The distinction between *use* and *usage* is a recurrent motif of the

book. While Professor Widdowson readily concedes that a knowledge of the code of English (*usage*) is a necessary condition for communication, he insists that it is not a sufficient condition:

In the L2 situation it is common to find learners producing linguistic patterns for their own sake without regard to their referential value. We do not normally consider these as errors, but why not? ... It does not matter what nonsense they [learners] produce so long as they produce it in correct sentences. (p. 209)

In emphasizing *usage* rather than *use*, teachers encourage the empty, 'poetic' excesses of 'babu'. Better, he claims, to build on the simplified 'pidgin' of the student attempting to use English referentially. Widdowson quotes Gertrude's retort to Polonius: 'More matter with less art' (p. 211).

The author does not pretend to present a complete pedagogy. However, the lessons he includes as illustrations do adequately exemplify his rhetorical orientation and his belief in the value of simplification. In this way, linguistically sophisticated texts are reduced to simple propositional statements. Students are then helped to build these into larger units of discourse, gradually approximating the linguistic level of texts they will encounter in their courses. I have only two reservations: the vast majority of discourse samples are from the fields of science and technology (more from other disciplines would be helpful), and in the sole paper on the value of poetry in second language teaching his discussion operates for the most part at a highly theoretical level. Considering the contentious nature of the topic, a more detailed discussion of *how* poetry can be used to develop communicative competence through the foregrounding of interpretative procedure would be welcome.

A minor irritation for the uninitiated is the free use of acronyms such as ELT, ESP and EST without prior explanation. Most readers would welcome an index, particularly since this book consists of papers which are 'variations on a theme' (p. 3), including repeated references to such key figures as Chomsky, Jakobson, Halliday, Labov, Lyons and Searle. However, these are minor points that do not detract from the value of Professor Widdowson's lucidly-written and thought-provoking book.

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