TWELVE YEARS OF ENGLISH TEACHING IN AFRIKAANS SCHOOLS

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The text of a paper delivered at a conference 'English as Communication', organised by the English Academy of Southern Africa. The editors are indebted to the author and the English Academy for permission to print this paper. Certain minor deletions have been made where references are irrelevant to the article in its present context.

This paper is based on an investigation undertaken by the Department of English at Potchefstroom University during 1964-5.

PURPOSE

Complaints about falling standards of English are rife. Some time ago the President of the English Academy of Southern Africa referred to the 'illiteracy' of university students of English. The purpose of this inquiry was to document, assess and define the inadequacies of these students somewhat more closely and to try to diagnose the causes. It was hoped that specific information about the typical errors and deficiencies of students from Afrikaans-medium schools would help the experts attending the Conference to find the weaknesses in the teaching methods used in the schools and to plan remedial measures. Obviously a report of this kind could also be used in the empirical verification of prognoses based on comparative studies of the two languages.

PROCEDURE

Participants were requested to list examples of errors and weaknesses during the course of the year and to classify and summarize their findings in a fairly detailed questionnaire supplied to them. They were also asked to specify the course to which an item referred and to indicate its frequency of occurrence on a five point scale. The findings of the various participants were then collated and summarized.

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SCOPE

Members of the departments of English at Afrikaans universities were invited to participate. Detailed answers were received from the Universities of Pretoria and Potchefstroom. The students observed probably represent a fair sample of the group that was being investigated. An appreciable proportion of them were from the 'hard-core' unilingually Afrikaans-speaking areas of the Northern and Western Transvaal, the Orange Free State and the North-western Cape. Obviously they were drawn mainly from the upper intelligence levels. Particular attention was paid to a small group that had gained distinctions in English, including a number who had gained six or more distinctions in the examination as a whole. As far as possible, students who were not authentically Afrikaans-speaking were disregarded.

RELEVANCE

Most of the students with whom the investigation was concerned were enrolled in courses in English literature and much of the comment by lecturers deals with the intellectual and cultural deficiencies of their charges. Some of the opinions expressed are probably vitiated by a lack of perspective, a tendency to absolutise an intellectual stance and a style of sensibility peculiar to the literary sub-culture and even to a particular period or movement within it. Nevertheless, the ability to communicate fully in a language does, to my mind, imply sympathetic familiarity with the way in which those who speak it tend to structure the world of their experience, both intellectually and emotionally. Some degree of skill at entering imaginatively into the culture and the values it embodies is essential in the advanced study of a language. Even in the exchange of factual information cultural overtones and their psychological implications may be of decisive importance.

FINDINGS

The errors discussed below are those of the ablest group of purely Afrikaans-speaking students who presented themselves for courses in English. The discussion is limited to them in an effort to eliminate the irremediable and therefore largely irrelevant factor of inherent lack of ability which, in practice, can only be dealt with negatively. Possible weaknesses in teaching method can best be diagnosed in terms of their effect on really capable students.

PRONUNCIATION

Systemic errors

On the whole, the students operate the full system of contrasts in the segmental phonemes. The location of primary or secondary stress in polysyllabic words is often incorrect. There is a tendency to transfer the Afrikaans pattern to English, in particular by shifting the stress towards the ends of words. The reduction of open and half-open vowels in syllables under weak stress is only partially achieved. Errors of phonemic magnitude are not common in the segmentals, but the phonetic realization of some of the phonemes is inaccurate, so that a native speaker has to make certain adjustments in interpreting the speech of the students and, conversely, some of them have trouble in understanding R.P. (and even S.A.R.P.) spoken at conversational tempo. Their difficulties may derive as much from prosodic features as from the segmental phonemes. In certain groups of sounds the deviation appears to be an exaggeration of the differences between R.P. and S.A.R.P.

Some of the areas of possible confusion are the following:

1. The contrasts in the pairs

/e/	-	/ æ /	as in	beg - bag
/o/	-	/ɔ:/	as in	sod - sword
/u/	-	/u:/	as in	pull - pool

In the latter two the point at issue is vowel quality rather than the feature of length.

2. /i:/ -   /I/   -   /a /

In extreme cases there is a tendency to operate the series of vowel phonemes in the words deep, dip, about as a two-term system, with the various allophones of /I/ assigned either to /i:/ or /a/. More generally, /I/ and /i:/ are kept apart by the feature of length only.

3. Voiced consonants in word-final position.

There is a tendency to neutralize the contrast between /g/ and /k/, /t/ and /d/, /p/ and /b/ by using a fortis unvoiced plosive for both members of each pair, which could lead to the confusion of pick and pig, bit and bid, etc. The same applies to the fricatives /v/, /d/, /z/, /ʒ /.

The mispronunciation of individual words

This is a major problem because the more intelligent students acquire a significant proportion of their vocabulary through reading. A list compiled over a long period might make it possible to predict and forestall some of the likely errors in a particular area.

GRAMMAR

The most persistent errors appear to be those deriving from the so-called 'categorical tyrannies' of the language, mainly:

1. Those that arise from grammatical considerations of a purely or almost purely formal nature, e.g. agreement in number in constructions such as
    There *is good reasons for this, This books, and especially the agreement of reference pronouns with their antecedents, in particular if a phrase, clause or full stop intervenes, e.g.:
    Those are my books. Please put *it on the table.
2. Errors deriving from differences between the two languages in patterns of content structure. It is not so much a matter of the students not knowing the linguistic forms, as of their not knowing when to use a particular form or, more precisely, remembering to use the appropriate form when required.
    The most irritating errors seem to be
    (a) the tendency to fluctuate unacceptably between the past and the present tenses in narration
    (b) ignoring the present perfect tense
    (c) overdoing the use of the past perfect
    (d) failing to manipulate the primary and historic sequences correctly, especially in reported speech

(b) above, is particularly interesting because it seems to represent, at the level of content structuring, very much the same phenomenon as that which we have noted in phonology with regard to /I/.

(a) derives from the intricate tangle of usage and literary convention that results from the imposition of the relevant English patterns on the corresponding Afrikaans substratum.

(c) is possibly a hypercorrect usage deriving partly from the correspondence in form between the English past perfect and the

Afrikaans indefinite; it may also be partly due to the apparent erosion of this form in unselfconscious English, which leads to fluctuation and irregularity in the pattern of usage.

VOCABULARY AND IDIOM

In the survey the word *idiom* was used in the colloquial, non-technical sense as a cover term for the recalcitrant odds and ends that lie on the cline between the main grammatical patterns on the one hand and content vocabulary on the other; e.g. minor grammatical patterns, points of what Hockett calls 'deeper grammar', the selection of function words such as prepositions and adverb particles and even content words which cause confusion because of the partial overlapping of form or meaning in the two languages. It is not possible to list here the hundreds of items that were collected. A classification would certainly be interesting but not particularly relevant in the present context.

What is important is that at the level of the intelligent undergraduate this area is responsible for the bulk of the errors. Looking back on some twenty years of teaching English to Afrikaans-speaking students, I have the impression that it is in the field of vocabulary and idiom that the most marked deterioration in the standard of achievement of the more intelligent pupils has occurred. The cause is probably to be found in a combination of two factors:

i.   diminishing contact with English resulting from the demographic and political ascendancy of the Afrikaner and the progressively greater availability of Afrikaans reading matter.
ii.   a greater reliance on language (grammar) lessons, which may have served to inhibit the deterioration of the pupils' mastery of the major grammatical patterns, but has also tended to divert attention from the area under discussion. In a certain sense, then, the teachers' (or syllabus makers') awareness of some of the linguistic ideas of the forties and fifties may not have been altogether beneficial.

The following random sample will serve to illustrate the kind of mistake a first-year student might make when using the language under pressure, and with his attention centred on content and not on the mechanics of expression. It should be noted that if the materials are

presented in the form of a language exercise to be done at leisure, most of the errors would be avoided.

to be blind *for the truth
to be *after the times
to achieve an end *with dubious means
*at the end he decided to...
to say *with a loud voice
to be proud *on something (cf. to pride yourself on)

Confusion of the members of the following pairs:
to learn/teach
to lend/borrow
to get up/stand up
to keep/hold
to seek/look for
to tread/step
to mind/care
to come to/get to
to remind/remember
to reign/rule
to raise/rouse
to become/grow (old)
to go/get (mad, better, etc.)
memory/remembrance
outing/outlet
surely/certainly
shy/ashamed

It requires some ingenuity to sort out the following sentence:

He rode into a lamp-pole with his sportmotor that he just last week bought for him, and broke his one leg underneath his knee.

CONCLUSIONS

Grammatical Exposition

It has been pointed out that apparently many of the errors derive from the fact that although the student knows the required linguistic forms, his interpretation of the events to which he wishes to refer is not of such a kind that it triggers the use of the correct form. It would seem

that the way in which speakers of a particular language arrest and segment the flux of experience in order to match it with discrete linguistic items and patterns tends to condition the nature of what such speakers perceive, at least in so far as it has a bearing on linguistic choices.

The futility of explanations is demonstrated in the examples quoted. One thing we can be quite sure of is that the students were nagged at *ad nauseam*. They are word perfect in the explanations of the relevant rules. Massive doses of exercises of the kind which require a student to change a sentence to the present perfect and/or the interrogative etc., are not of much use either, mainly because of the element of 'over-cuing'. Once the student knows that it is the present perfect that you want, he has little trouble in producing it. It is when he has to segment and categorize the events of his experience in order to match these with suitable patterns of expression, while at the same time concentrating on content and not on the mechanics of the language, that he slips into error because he tends to revert to the habit system of his mother-tongue.

In exercises designed to overcome this problem the contextual clue which is to trigger the desired response should be reiterated with each repetition of the form, but eventually the clue should not be given greater prominence than is usual in natural speech situations, because it is these that he is being trained to face. For the same reason it is necessary to load the exercises progressively with elements designed to distract the student's attention and to prevent him from concentrating exclusively on the grammar.

Even drill of this kind will not fully bridge the gap between exercises and free speech because in the exercises the student has been specifically alerted to grammatical pitfalls.

.It is true that many of the errors of students result from an apparent lack of awareness that their speech habits differ from the approved models, but recognition of the error will not necessarily eliminate it, certainly not permanently. Proof of this is to be found in a situation with which those of us who have trained second-language teachers are probably all familiar: A student may have grasped a point of grammar sufficiently well to devise relatively sophisticated drills to train a class to avoid errors in using it, but in writing up his lesson the student will make the very same mistake himself. Of course logically he

ought not to, but the extreme complexity of the language and the so-called 'narrow span of consciousness' make it difficult for him to keep all the balls, with which he is juggling, in the air at the same time.

In practice there is also the very real danger that in order to offer his explanations, the teacher will mount so much linguistic apparatus that the bulk of his time will be devoted to theoretical exposition. Even the language teacher is entitled to a modicum of intellectual ambition. Explanation could be an intelligent activity. Drill is not.

THE USE OF THE MOTHER-TONGUE

Obviously the type of command sought is of decisive importance in determining the methods to be adopted. Where the objective is not full productive oral proficiency, exposition may be a useful approach. In the initial stages of a course for adult beginners, for instance, the use of the mother-tongue might well serve to prevent what has been called 'the dry-rot of non-comprehension' -- perhaps the worst feature of the unadulterated direct method.

When the Afrikaans-speaking pupil reaches the high school after seven years -- a thousand teaching hours -- of English, it is possible to avoid the use of Afrikaans without any loss of efficiency. An explanation by the teacher provides a ready-made opportunity for a well motivated comprehension exercise in English. The worst feature of explanations in Afrikaans is that both the teacher and the pupil are continually tempted to revert to the more familiar medium and unless this tendency is strenuously opposed, they will slide into sloth to the extent of hardly ever speaking English. Preliminary inquiries seem to indicate that, for first-year students at my university, a significant correlation can be established between the willingness of their high school teachers to revert to Afrikaans and the students' lack of aural-oral proficiency in English.

The importance of the student's psychological 'attitude' towards the language should not be underrated. A little firmness on the part of the teacher will train the pupil to address him in English even after school hours. The amount of additional practice in the effective use of the language that is lost if the teacher obligingly reverts to Afrikaans at the least sign of difficulty is not inconsiderable.

READING

It would seem that the main deficiency of Afrikaans-speaking students who present themselves for university courses in English is lack of experience of the language in use. As long as the medium remains a translucent curtain between the student and the text he is studying, it is unreasonable to expect an acceptable response from him. He must also learn to express himself with ease and fluency and to use the language with a fair degree of subtlety and precision.

To my mind it is virtually impossible to teach this kind of command in formal lessons. The immense complexity of the language would call for a degree of sophistication in programming which must remain, for the foreseeable future at least, altogether beyond our means. Furthermore, there appears to be a saturation point beyond which language drill becomes prohibitively subject to a process of diminishing returns. At the level of near-native proficiency, drills, even if properly selective, appear to have little or no edge over random exposure to the language used in interesting contexts, particularly if the psychological colouring of the two types of activity is taken into account.

Ultimately, one learns a language by being exposed to words used in reference to situations. At an advanced level this experience cannot be supplied in 'potted' form. The only way in which students growing up in a unilingual Afrikaans community can gain sufficient experience of the language is by wide reading supplemented, of course, by oral and written exercises scientifically directed at the major critical areas of grammar and usage. In view of the above, it is to be deplored that the amount of reading required in the lower grade language courses is being reduced.

UNIVERSITY COURSES

The deficiencies of highly intelligent students after twelve years of English may be due to inadequate syllabuses which do not extend the pupil to capacity, or to poor teaching and other remediable factors in the educational system. They could also be inherent in the situation in which we have one language and culture being superimposed on another, in circumstances which limit the amount of contact we are able to make available. If they should, in fact, be inevitable, then the

demands of lecturers in English at Afrikaans universities would be unreasonable and the latter would be well advised to contain their zeal (for the discipline they profess) sufficiently to allow them to adjust their courses to the realities of the situation. It is my impression that, whatever concessions they might be willing to make in the initial stages of the course, they are averse to relaxing the standard required for a degree. I, for one, cannot help feeling that we would be at fault if we were to allow ourselves to slither into as easy compromise with expediency.

At the same time we have to face the fact that we are moving towards the virtual exclusion of the *bona fide* Afrikaans-speaking student from university studies in English (but not in German, French, Latin, Greek, etc.). In my Department, for instance, seven per cent of the total first-year intake pass in the third year. They consist mainly, although not exclusively, of students who have had wider experience of English than is required for matriculation on the 'B-level' – they are students who are English-speaking, or have taken English on the 'A-level', or have had extensive experience of English outside the school.

It may well be that the orientation of our courses towards literature, to the virtual exclusion of synchronic linguistic studies, is at fault. Obviously the departments of English are not professional training schools, but it is true that many, if not most, of our students become teachers of English as a second language, and that the connection between their university courses in English and their future careers is tenuous. Courses of a mainly linguistic nature might tend to narrow the gap between the school and the university in more than one way.

It might be wise to consider the introduction of a 'teacher's option' which, unlike the present 'Practical English', would not be a 'dead-end' course. If the universities fail to supply graduates in English, the Departments of Education will train their own people and they will obviously use the available material. The chances are that the average future teacher of English at an Afrikaans school will be a 'B-stream' Standard Ten pupil with three years of professional training.

ORAL TESTS

Inquiry indicates that the poor performance of first-year students in spoken English may be partly due to the fact that proper attention to

oral work is not enforced by the school examination. The present oral examination is often regarded merely as an opportunity to mitigate the effects of the more rigorous public examination.

Partly with the above in mind, and partly for our own purposes, my Department has been experimenting with objective oral tests. We mean to use them as placement tests and to provide an objective measurement of fluctuations in the standard from year to year. They might also provide interesting information about the growth of proficiency in classes in which no direct attempt is made to teach the relevant skills, e.g. courses in literature. Some aspects of the problems involved in designing such tests are mentioned below.

NATURE OF THE TESTS

If the test is meant to assess the student's ability to communicate in English it has to be a proficiency test in the sense that it does not merely set out to measure the student's achievement with regard to a syllabus which may be an arbitrary projection of certain aspects of the language.

It must test the student's ability

1. to produce responses involving, in integrated form, the full range of linguistic mechanisms (sound, grammar, lexis)
2. to perceive and respond to the unobtrusive contextual clues which, in normal communication, trigger one response rather than another (i.e., the test must avoid 'over-cuing'). This involves measures to counter the general alert inherent in the test situation, e.g. pressure of time, the introduction of distracting material, the testing of one type of skill while the attention is focused on another, etc.

The test must discriminate at the required level of proficiency, i.e. the items must be derived from the critical area in which a capable student produces an acceptable response but a weak one does not. This raises the problem of face validity. The rooted public dislike of a test that discriminates sharply appears to be shared by teachers and even examining bodies.

SCORING

It is a feature of such a test that an examiner evaluating a set of answers for a second time after a year or more has elapsed, should award the

same score to it, and that a number of examiners in different parts of the country should achieve a similar consistency. Apart from detailed instructions to the examiners, this involves the careful selection of items and the use of devices to channel responses so as to avoid a variety of marginally acceptable answers. Even so, much experiment is required to eliminate unsuitable items.

Testing the production of sounds objectively presents apparently insuperable problems. The possible errors with which we are concerned at this levels are mainly subphonemic and are ranged along a cline of deviation. The advantages that can be achieved are:

1. The student is not specifically told that sound production is being tested at that juncture. He is thus likely to use his normal, habitual pronunciation.
2. The items are selected to test specific sounds which are of critical importance at this level of proficiency.
3. They are evaluated one at a time by an examiner who is concentrating on this particular point and can, if necessary, re-run the candidate's tape.
4. All the students are tested on the same problems in the same situation.

ADMINISTRATION

For use in the public examination a battery of taped tests would be required. Practical problems of standardization could be overcome by unobtrusively using groups of students in their first year at colleges or universities as subjects. Their performance could be correlated with other available scores, such as the results of the public examination.

The tests could then be administered by the schools, and after the results have been submitted, an examiner or a small panel could moderate the scoring of selected samples of the tapes and, where necessary, make statistical adjustments to the standard set in individual schools.

CORRECTION

Twelve Years of English Teaching in Afrikaans Schools, by Professor J.A. Venter, in *English Usage in Southern Africa,* vol. 6, no. 2, September 1975

On page 3 of this article three symbols were wrongly transcribed. The list of transcriptions should be as follows:

1. /e/ – /æ/ as in beg – bag
   / ɒ / – /ɔ:/ as in sod – sword
   /u/ – /u:/ as in pull – pool
2. /i:/ – /I/ – / ə /
   ...with the various allophones of /I/ assigned either to /i:/ or / ə /
3. ...The same applies to the fricatives /v/, /ð /, /z/, /3/

We offer our sincere apologies to the author for these mistakes.

Editors