LINGUISTICS FOR "EVERYSTUDENT"

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0. Introduction

The stated topic for this most interesting and revealing symposium was "The Linguistic Sciences in a changing context" and it of some interest (especially since no other speaker seems to have picked up on it) that instead of referring to "Linguistics", the organizers saw fit to characterize the field as "the linguistic *sciences*". Without wanting to initiate a debate as to whether linguistics is a science or not — I for one think that it is, to some extent (and the extent may be the real cause for debate!) — I feel it is worth noting that "relevance to wider curricula", the session title for my presentation and the one out of the pre-announced areas of focus for the symposium that my presentation is aimed at, could simply mean looking to ways in which linguistics, as a science, can address an audience of non-scientists.

The issue is not really that simplistic, but my focus for the most part is not on linguistics as a science per se, but rather is oriented more towards linguistics as a humanistic enterprise.

This is altogether appropriate, I would argue, for the key to at least half the battle in understanding language lies in recognizing that language is a social phenomenon, something that exists, so to speak, in the interactions among humans and in the way they define themselves as humans. This is not to deny the psychological and more individual side of language or to ignore the view that treats language as an abstract symbolic system with mathematical properties, but rather to focus on the aspect of language and of linguistics that, I argue, is critical to reaching the larger audience implicit in the declared focus of this session. Moreover, in a changing context in which linguistics, like many fields, is moving increasingly, it seems, towards

formalization and technologicization in its methods and paradigms for inquiry (note the presentations by Dan Jurafsky, Lise Menn, Steve Levinson, and Molly Mack on computational linguistics and neuroscience), some recognition of the less formal side, and the potential audiences in that camp, is important.

It is appropriate also to consider those on the "other side of the tracks" since the dual status of linguistics is reflected in its classification in various universities, partly due to linguistics being (as Jerry Morgan noted in his introduction to the symposium) the new kids on the academic block. At some schools (e.g. the University of Washington), linguistics counts administratively as being in the humanities, whereas at others (e.g. the University of California at Berkeley) it is treated as a social science (see Pullum 1985/1991 for some characteristically enlightening observations on this subject). At my university, the schizophrenic status of the field is reflected in the fact that our administrative home is in the humanities but several of our courses are classified curricularly as social sciences. Some of my comments later on address some of the consequences of this classification (and it is certainly a topic for discussion to consider just where the field *should* be classified).

Part of what I am talking about here is "linguistics for every student", what is given for my title, i.e. linguistics for any potential taker, for as many potential takers as possible, but some of my comments address also linguistics for "Everystudent", what I had originally thought of for my title, representing the ordinary "person on campus", the regular Jane or Joe who is not likely to ever be a linguistics major but who might take linguistics to fulfill a requirement; the number of "Everystudents" may not be the same as the total of "every student" but my claim is that we can orient our linguistics offerings towards this hypothetical "Everystudent" and in so doing may be able ultimately to attract "every student" into exposure to linguistics.

1. Achieving a Basic Goal of Undergraduate Linguistics Courses

In any case, I start with my take on what a key goal of an undergraduate program in linguistics ought to be, namely to instill in students some sense of just how remarkable an entity human language is.

One way to do achieve that goal is to follow a common cognitive strategy of looking for the familiar in the unfamiliar (the basis of analogy, and the way Wordsworth characterized how humans deal with something new) and thus to approach language through what students already know, whether or not they are aware of it; here, the unfamiliar is linguistics itself as well as linguistic analysis, whereas the familiar is the students' own usage and linguistic experience

One area that can be tapped in this way, possibly even towards the beginning of an introductory course is pragmatics, the interpretation of and utterances in context and for that matter, semantics in a general sense, for the distinction that linguists draw between semantics (e.g. formal, truth-conditional semantics) and pragmatics (contextually driven interpretations) are not as clear to students, for whom all interpretation in their real lives is of sentences in context, not as disembodied units for analysis. Students have experience with this, whether they know it as pragmatics/semantics or not, since everyone uses language and interprets utterances as part of being involved in interactions with other speakers.

Some linguists have recognized the potential for using semantics and pragmatics as a starting point for getting students into the study of language. Janda 1998 outlines how one can and should, in his terms, teach linguistics "backwards", reversing the usual flow from the lowest level of phonetics to the highest level of meaning; he notes that students have a hard time dealing with language without meaning, i.e. just segmenting words into phones and analyzing the phonological units, and he advocates starting with the level of meaning and "working backwards", so to speak, down to the

level of meaningless sounds. One is reminded here of Roman Jakobson's statement that "language without meaning is meaningless" (a very meaningful though on one reading tautologous statement that only Jakobson could have gotten away with!). Indeed, several instructors in the beginning linguistics class at Ohio State (Linguistics 201: Introduction to Language) start linguistic analysis with morphology, where the manipulation of meaningful units provides students with a concreteness that is not available with segmenting sounds and looking for their distribution. Moreover, a couple of introductory linguistics textbooks take meaning as their point of departure for introducing students to linguistics; Parker 1986 has the following order of presentation of "core areas" of linguistic analysis: pragmatics, semantics, syntax, morphology, and phonology, and in Jeffries 1998, the order of chapters is "sounds and meaning; words and meaning; structure and meaning; textual meaning; contextual meaning; and meaning and reality", with each chapter (as well as the title) stressing meaning in language.

Thus drawing students' attention to what makes Speaker B obnoxious in often-discussed exchanges like: A. *Can you pass the salt?* B. *Yes, but I won't.* can generally provoke contributions by students of similar experiences of their own. There is also the possibility of drawing on dialogue from movies and plays, and even occasional reflective comments from within the popular media, such as this learned disquisition by Johnny Depp's character in the movie *Donnie Brasco* (where Depp plays an undercover agent who infiltrates organized crime) on the varied meanings of the expression *Forget about it* that his mobster buddies (including the boss, Lefty) use a lot; Depp is talking with two other FBI agents, and though the content is somewhat raw and definitely crude, the scene still makes for an interesting point of departure for discussion of pragmatics — moreover, there are intonational differences (indicated somewhat inadequately with numbers over each syllable, where 1 indicates highest

intonational prominence) as well as voice-quality differences (some glottality (indicated by underlining) in the second case, much more in the fourth case, and a drawn-out pronunciation in the third) associated with the different instantiations of *Forget about it*, but such differences provide added fodder for class discussion:

Agent #1: Hey, can I ask you something? What's "Forget about it"? What is that?

Depp: "Forget about it", it's like, uh — if you agree with someone, y'know,

2 1 3 3 4

like "Raquel Welch is one great piece of ass, *forget about it*. But then if

3 1 3 4 4

you disagree, like "A Lincoln is better than a Cadillac, *<u>forget</u> about it*, y'know, but then it's also if something is the greatest thing in the

2 1 2 2 3

world, like "Mingaro's peppers, *forget about it*. Y'know, but it's also like saying "Go to Hell!", too, like y'know, like uh "Hey Paulie, you

2 1 2 2 2

got a one-inch pecker" and Paulie says "*<u>Forget about it</u>*!".

Agent #1: <u>Forget about it</u>. <u>Paulie</u>, <u>forget about it</u>.

Depp: Sometimes it just mean, uh, forget about it.

[Laughter]

Agent #1: All right. Thank you very much; I got it.

Depp: Let me tell you something — I don't get this boat for Lefty ...

Agent #1: What?

Agent #2: Forget about it?

Depp: Fuckin' forget about it!

Similarly, sociolinguistics can be tapped, especially with regard to variation and the social value of different variants, since students "live" sociolinguistics on a daily basis, through their encounters with others, their assessments of the usage of others, their concerns about the impressions they make with their usage, and so on and so forth; even if the students are not aware of what they know in this regard, it can be brought to the surface fairly readily. Regional differences between northern vs. southern Ohio or Appalachian features in pronunciation and morphosyntax and their evaluation in Central Ohio work well at Ohio State University:

(1) a. Northern Ohio (e.g. Cleveland) *bag* vs. Southern Ohio (e.g. Chillicothe) *sack*

b. Appalachian *needs washed* (vs. *needs to be washed* or *needs washing*), *fish* pronounced as [fiʃ] (vs. [fIʃ] elsewhere in Ohio)

and there are undoubtedly similar features to point to elsewhere in the US that a school's typical student population will relate to (e.g. pronunciations of *Chicago* in Illinois) which mark a person not just as being from somewhere but also as belonging to a particular group (social, ethnic, or the like). I have found that recognizing the role even of vocabulary particular to a given interest group they belong to or a job they hold — jargon, that is — can be an eye-opener for many students, and such jargon is a type of socially based variation that is very salient for them.

The main point here is that students *experience* the subject matter of pragmatics and sociolinguistics on a daily basis, whether they know it or not, and so we can tap that experience and exploit it to draw them into understanding linguistics. Needless to say, this is not the case with a lot of areas in linguistics that are standard fare in introductory linguistics classes, such as doing phonemic analysis or applying tests for constituent structure in syntax!

In fact, this can be a winning strategy in lots of ways. At Ohio State, we have found that focusing several low-level undergraduate courses on sociolinguistics, i.e. on

aspects of linguistics that are highly accessible to ordinary folk, has had a dramatic effect on our ability to reach a large number of students (i.e., we have made positive strides forward with enrollments). These courses are listed in (2):

(2) Linguistics 330: Language and Gender

Linguistics 361: Language and Social Identity in the US

Linguistics 365: Language Across Cultures

Linguistics 385: Language Change and Development

and the titles are fairly self-evident as to course content, though note that 385 is a low-level historical linguistics class that uses synchronic variation as the basis for understanding the processes of language change). Based on Gregory Ward's presentation, it is clear that a similar strategy is working at Northwestern University too.

In recent years, with declining enrollments in our basic low-level introductory linguistics class, we experimented at Ohio State by offering more sections of these courses, as well as a low-level psycholinguistics (Linguistics 371: Language and the Mind) which we had the good fortune to be able to cross-list with Psychology, with its seemingly endless supply of majors! Still, the sociolinguistics classes were the heart of the experiment, and a successful experiment it was! Enrollments have become quite robust, led by these classes (see Joseph 1998 and Spring et al. 1998 for some discussion).

By way of documenting the success of using sociolinguistics to reach undergraduates, I give the following statistics, reflecting the enrollments for our overall offerings at the low end of our undergraduate program as we have increased the number of sections of our sociolinguistically oriented courses in some cases with a concomitant reduction in the number of sections of the general introductory survey course, Linguistics 201; note that in x/y, x = number of sections of 201 and y =

number of sections of other, generally sociolinguistically oriented classes; Ohio State is on a quarter system, and these numbers reflect the total over the three quarters of the academic year, with the summer quarter being listed separately:

(3) 1994-5: 34 (32/2) sections; 904 students; summer '95: 6 (4/2) sections; 70 students

1995-6:40 (36/4) sections; 947 students; summer '96: 7 (4/3) sections; 91 students

1996-7:41 (33/8) sections; 1062 students; summer '97: 8 (4/4) sections; 151 students

1997-8:47 (33/14) sections; 1399 students; summer '98: 8 (4/4) sections; 128 students

1998-9:17 (12/5) sections; 497 students [NB: this is for autumn quarter only; two of these sections are Honors section]

The 1996-7/1997-8 increases are not just due to our offering more sections, since the average per section has also increased dramatically from its 1995-96 low point: 26.5 ('94-5), 23.7 ('95-6), 25.9 ('96-7), 29.7 ('97-8), and in any case, the increase in the number of the sociolinguistically oriented courses between 96-7 and 97-8 (from 8 to 14) was driven by their sustainability — each extra section was able to meet, and indeed to far exceed, the minimum number of students needed to make the offering viable.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the increase in enrollments spearheaded by the shift in the types of courses we offered at the undergraduate level seems to have helped to buoy up *all* the offerings at that level, for the enrollments in the general survey course are up also.

These numbers speak for themselves and show that there is a way of bringing linguistics to the masses, to Everystudent and to every student, if we find the right "hook".

We have to remember too, though, as Richard Janda has reminded me, that "Everystudent" changes over the years, and thus what may have worked in one period will not always be a salient hook. He has pointed out that the highly successful

introductory textbook by Vicki Fromkin and Bob Rodman (Fromkin & Rodman 1974ff.) in its early editions had lots of references to *Alice in Wonderland*, but the authors found that they had to tone down those references in later editions because students simply were not familiar with Lewis Carroll — probably references to Alice in Chains or Alice Cooper would have been more salient than Alice in Wonderland! For instance, in the 1993 edition, the section on "competence and performance" has a *Far Side* cartoon by Gary Larson and just a few lines about Alice where the same section in the 1974 edition had far more discussion of two passages from *Alice in Wonderland* . Thus, we must always keep in mind that "Everystudent" is a moving target!

2. A Further Strategy — The Human Side of Historical Linguistics

Another angle on making linguistics accessible to "Everystudent" is to present ways in which linguistics and affiliated areas that have depended on the results and successes of linguistics can tap some basic aspects of "humanitas" that students can relate to. By this I mean those universals of human experience that furnish excellent material from which we can score linguistic points, either about matters of linguistic analysis or about potential benefits of linguistics.

A good example has been developed in the classroom by an advanced graduate student at Ohio State, Jen Muller; she uses the first quatrain of a sonnet by John Milton written around 1632 to illustrate language change by giving an example of early Modern English that shows differences in vocabulary, morphology, syntax, even spelling, compared with Modern English; interestingly, she has found that the students respond well to the *content*, specifically a 23-year old guy wondering why he hasn't made more of his life and why he doesn't have more direction and maturity; this is thus a timeless theme, and the purely linguistic exercise of comparing the earlier

language with a later stage of the language allows the more humanistic point to come through, and at the same time, their interest in the content allows the students to become more engaged in the exercise:

How soon hath time the suttle theef of youth
Stolen on his wing my three and twentieth yeer
My hasting days fly on with full career
But my late spring no bud or blossom shewth.
Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth
That I to manhood am arrived so near
And inward ripeness doth much less appear
That some more timely-happy spirits endu'th.
Yet be it less or more or soon or slow
It shall be still in strictest measure eev'n
To that same lot however mean or high
Toward which Time leads me and the will of Heaven.
All is, if I have grace to use it so
As ever in my great task Master's eye. (John Milton, c. 1632)

There are several similar cases like this, where the content is intrinsically interesting or compelling in some way and the results of linguistics or the application of principles taken from linguistics, e.g. in philological interpretation) can be seen as playing a role in bringing the relevant text to light.

For instance, the Rig Veda, the collection of ancient Hindu sacred hymns composed in the oldest Sanskrit known, whose study by linguists has formed the backbone of comparative Indo-European linguistics, is a wonderfully compelling text, rich with imagery and archaic language that transports one back well beyond the date of 1200 BC conventionally given for its composition; what can be particularly

interesting to students in a beginning linguistics class is the recognition that recurring themes of the Rig Veda, as described by Wendy O'Flaherty in the introduction to her translation of it (1981) sound just like titles from popular books of today: "conflict within the nuclear family and uneasiness about the mystery of birth from male and female parents; the preciousness of animals ...; the wish for knowledge, inspiration, long life, and immortality" and so on. The more things change, the less things change, a valuable lesson for students and one that comparative linguistics of the 19th century has helped to make accessible to us today.

Another case like this that I am quite fond of, where the results of comparative Indo-European linguistics and philology have yielded similar insights, is Craig Melchert's article about the Hittite king Hattusili facing death (Melchert 1991); Hattusili, a Hittite king of the second millennium BC, apparently was dictating his last will and testament to a scribe, and, suffering an ultimately fatal or nearly fatal episode as he finished the official dictation at the end, began reflecting somewhat incoherently about his impending death, ravings which were dutifully copied down and recorded for posterity by the scribe. Hattusili ends with an exhortation to a woman he has been calling for: "Protect me on your bosom from the earth", apparently his real last words. Melchert's interpretation of this, in the light of the fact that the Hittites seem to have practiced burial (not cremation) but believed in an afterlife and immortality in divine form for its kings, is that "Despite ... assurances of happy immortality, however, the dying Hattusili is frightened. He sees only the immediate certainty that he will soon be put down into the cold, dark earth alone, and like many a poor mortal since he finds this a terrifying prospect". I find Melchert's closing remark right after this to be especially significant in terms of linking modern-day folks with those that preceded them 3500 years ago, as he says, with real eloquence: "... there seems to be little fundamental difference between us and ancient peoples when it comes to facing

death. Hattusili's words speak to us directly across the centuries. His fear is palpable. We not only at once understand but also are moved by his agony and his desperate cry for his loved one's tender comfort. These emotions are neither Hittite nor Indo-European, neither ancient nor modern, but simply human".

In a similar vein, especially as regards linking folks across centuries, the following passage from Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* gives voice to a question that could easily come up in an introductory linguistics class — one can imagine a student asking whether people *really* spoke as they seem to have in Shakespeare's day! — namely the very real wonderment at the fact that a different form of the language 1000 years before the speaker's time could nonetheless serve its speakers well for "sondry usages", even though in this case, the speaker's vantage point is not 1998 but rather some 600 years ago:

> Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge
> Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho
> That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge
> Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so,
> And spedde as wel in love as men now do;
> Ek for to wynnen love in sondry ages,
> In sondry londes, sondry ben usages. (G. Chaucer *Troilus and Criseyde* II.22-28)

Pieces like these allow one make important linguistic points about the nature of data collection from older stages of a language and from ancient languages, about the need to "decipher" texts, and to allow for change within a given language, but their content speaks to universals of the human experience, expressing timeless feelings that everyone is aware of, and so makes an important nonlinguistic point about the links among peoples at all periods in history. Moreover, their use in introductory linguistics

courses, quite frankly, introduces a "kinder and gentler" spirit to the linguistics classroom that can provide a useful balance to the rigors of formal linguistic analysis.

3. Extending the Humanistic Strategy

Going further in this direction, since my talk has taken a literary turn, there is an audience of literature-oriented students that linguists can and should talk to within the academy; the antipathy that seems to exist in many language departments between linguists and literature types is unfortunate but real (as William Davies' presentation made clear). My Old Irish class at Harvard 25 years ago is a case in point, with 3 budding Indo-European linguists and 3 Celtic literature students — we sat on opposite sides of the table and at one point one of the literature students said "If they [i.e., the linguists] ask one more question about a nasalizing relative clause I'll go crazy"; of course, it is *just* as important for literature students to be able to recognize a nasalizing relative clause as it is for linguists, so we were in the same boat, but they saw us as adversaries! It makes one think that literature types are from Venus while linguists are from Mars, with no reconciliation, but I would suggest that there are some real benefits for both sides to be gained from talking to one another!

My other role at Ohio State, besides being in the Linguistics Department, is in the Slavic Languages and Literatures Department, where I hold a 30% appointment. In that department, all beginning graduate students in Russian literature take a proseminar, covering an introduction to Russian linguistics. While the formalism of linguistics may be daunting and off-putting to these generally non-formalistically-inclined students, they can come to appreciate the goals of modern linguistics with the right sorts of prompts from us, e.g. by likening the quest for understanding how language emerges in individuals to other aspects of human development such as walking, and the quest for understanding change in language to an interest in change

in other human institutions. Moreover, there are topics that they can relate to, e.g. phonic imagery / verbal art, discourse analysis and literary criticism, use of vernacular in dialogue for special effect, etc. It is useful to note here what William Davies mentioned in his presentation regarding the translation studies program at the University of Iowa and the French linguistics and literature initiative at the University of South Carolina, as well as the existence of works like Traugott & Pratt 1980 that are directly aimed at this audience.

In my own experience, I have found, while lecturing to the group of Russian literature students this year in the linguistics proseminar, that these students responded well to the use of phonic effects in literature, such as the well-known instances from Tennyson:

(4) a. The moan of doves in immemorial elms

And murmuring of innumerable bees (Tennyson *The Princess* VII.206-7)

b. A gloom monotonously musical

With hum of murmurous bees, ... (Tennyson *Sense and Conscience* 45-6)

where the preponderance of [m]'s is supposed to iconically summon up the sensory image of the humming of bees; it allows students to ponder the old but important question of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, and the role of an author's conscious choices in creating verbal imagery and in stylistics. Such examples can be found in literature in all languages, no doubt — for the Russian students, I included the following from Pushkin's *Evgeny Onegin*:

(5) ʃipen'e penistyx bokalov i punʃa

hissing/NOM foamy/GEN.PL wine-glasses/GEN and punch/GEN

plamen' goluboj

flame/NOM blue/NOM

'The hissing of foamy wine-glasses and the blue flame of punch ...'

where the repeated labials and the sibilants supposedly reinforce the image of bubbling wine.

4. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let me say that I can offer no guarantee that these considerations will have dramatic effects on enrollment or will rescue courses or keep deans off the backs of linguistics department chairs, or whatever, but I see them as part of an orientation that the field *can* take to be inclusive in its reach and to try to bring the results and methods of linguistics to audiences that might otherwise be left behind as the field shifts towards an increasingly formal and technological orientation.

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