

Linguistics and the Teaching of the Mother Tongue

Walter HIRTLE

Department of Language and Linguistics
Laval University

Ever since the study of language started priding itself on the name "linguistics," there have been attempts to grasp the whole of language as a single phenomenon. These attempts have vacillated between the Scylla of examining merely the form or sign to the neglect of meaning, and the Charybdis of treating meaning without taking into account the form. It has become abundantly clear that any sound approach to language must keep constantly in mind both terms of this fundamental form/meaning relationship so as to avoid the fatal step of taking one part of the object for the whole. However this requirement does not permit us to treat form and meaning as equal and interchangeable parts. Indeed, a moment's reflection on the most obvious of language functions - communication - reveals that its purpose is to communicate meanings, not forms. That is to say, the form, necessary though it may be, is no more than a means at the service of the meaning. That is why, in a country like Canada, where dialectal differences of English are of little social consequence, one need devote relatively little time to the teaching of the form or sign, be it on the phonetic, the morphological or the syntactic level. And so the language teacher's prime concern must be with meaning.

Before turning to the teaching of meaning in the mother tongue, we must make another distinction, this time within meaning itself. It is the distinction between two types of meaning: on the one hand lexical or notional meaning, as, for example, what distinguishes the meanings of words like *dog* and *cat*; on the other hand grammatical meaning, as what makes the difference between, say, *dog* and *dogs*, or *go* and *went*. The point I am trying to make can be put this way: any word in English involves a sign (or form) and a dual meaning so that its sign always refers both to a lexical meaning (or its substitute) and a grammatical meaning.

One consequence of this basic property of human language is that in order to teach meaning effectively not only should both types, lexical and grammatical, be taught, but the teacher must be

constantly aware of which type he is teaching. The teaching of lexical meaning, which aims at a more rigorous and precise use of words, takes on many forms from straightforward vocabulary building to the enlightened teaching of literature. But the teaching of grammatical meaning is often neglected and it is to this problem which I wish to devote the remainder of my time.

One aim - perhaps *the* aim - of teaching grammatical meaning, as of teaching lexical meaning or even language itself, is to make the mother tongue a more and more effective instrument of thought and expression. To this end, the pupil must be led to make better and better use of the resources his tongue puts at his disposal. The teaching of lexical meaning involves, to a large extent, the acquisition of these resources: the learning of new words. But in the case of grammatical meaning, the student already possesses these resources (we never have to increase the native speaker's grammar through a course in "grammar building") so that the teacher's role is to lead him to exploit more fully and more effectively what he already possesses.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate what I have in mind is to take a concrete example, the use of the progressive form, and to apply to it the technique of contrasting it in minimal pairs with the simple form to evoke the difference of meaning. It should be stressed that the aim here is not to correct usage (I know of no native speaker who uses these forms incorrectly) but to make the speaker more and more sensitive to the expressive effects of the grammatical form. One might start with such obvious nuances as those distinguishing the following pairs:

They were losing the war.
They lost the war.

He was eating the pie.
He ate the pie.

He is smoking.
He smokes.

From there the student might be led very gradually to discern finer and finer effects as in the following:

He is speaking Russian.
He speaks Russian.

I see stars.
I am seeing stars.

I am resigning.
I resign.

Look, it's floating!
Look, it floats!

Eventually he can be brought to appreciate and describe the very subtle nuances that distinguish pairs like the following:

He is feeling better.
He feels better.

It was beginning to spread.
It began to spread.

I'll be seeing you tomorrow.
I'll see you tomorrow.

In all such cases the student unconsciously makes the proper distinction whenever he speaks. The role of the grammar teacher should be to make the student more and more aware of the remarkably delicate instrument he has at his disposal and so gradually awaken in him a sense of wonder with regard to his mother tongue, a sense which is one of the marks of an educated person.