

From "Applied Linguistics" to "Foreign Language Teaching Research". The West German situation.

by Dietmar Rösler,
Department of German,
University College Dublin.

In this article I will describe how the academic approach to foreign language teaching in Germany has changed during the last 10 or 15 years. As is always the case with recent history some matters are not yet quite clear and it will always be necessary to take into consideration that the following pages are the result of a rather subjective perception of this development.

The title is not quite correct as 'applied linguistics' includes for example research on aphasia or on language processing by computer and I will be concerned only with that section of applied linguistics which deals with foreign language teaching. In addition to this the English reader should be aware of the fact that there is a difference between 'applied linguistics' in the English speaking area and the German 'angewandte Linguistik', though the latter looks like the appropriate translation. While most 'applied linguists' in the late 60's and early 70's in Britain would not have denied that linguistics dominated foreign language teaching and that the results of linguistic research should be applied to foreign language teaching, they nevertheless accepted that there is a gap between these two which has to be taken into consideration in the application process.¹ In Germany at that time 'angewandte Linguistik' proposed rather rigid devices for teaching, directly derived from the dominating type of linguistics, generative grammar. Computers might have had a chance to learn a foreign language with these devices, students definitely did not (cf. for example Meyer (1970) and — probably the worst example — Peuser (1973)).² To find out how that particular kind of 'applied linguistics' came about in West Germany, one has to consider the situation of

linguistics at most of the German universities³ in those days.

The universities change

A student of linguistics in the late 60's/early 70's would have received the impression that real linguistics began in 1957 with the publication of Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*, reached its peak in 1965 with his *Aspects* and by 1970 had developed into a fight between two factions, one an orthodox wing and the other a rebel group proposing 'generative semantics'. Maybe he even heard of a shining knight entering the lists, called Montague. As for the past, there might have been one linguist called Zellig Harris acceptable, because he was the teacher of Noam Chomsky, but he also fell into the category of distributionalists, taxonomists and other rank behaviorists, who must have been pretty 'stupid' because they did not know about such trivial things as the creativity of language and innate ideas. Thus they were not really worth being studied.

Such a description is not a total picture of the Departments of Linguistics in Germany — but most students who dealt, and still deal now, with linguistics in Germany do not do this because of their association with linguistics as a formal subject, but because they study English, French, German, Italian, etc., and, as part of that study, have to collect linguistics certificates as well as certificates for the literature sections of the respective subject. And in most of these departments, linguistics was at its very beginning and had just begun to play an important role, i.e. being regarded as equal to the traditional sections — medieval and modern literature. This was the

result of two simultaneous developments:

a) The policy of the government to open up universities to more students specifically from the lower middle and working classes by introducing a rather comprehensive grant system and abolishing fees started to show results. The number of students increased. New universities were planned and built, existing universities were given more staff.⁴

b) Linguistics became fashionable at that time. The main reason might have been a political one. In the late sixties, during the waves of student protest, general opinion in academic circles was much more left oriented than it is now. This was particularly true of students and of sections of the staff in the language and social science departments. Many of the conservative members of those departments were located in the old German, old English, etc., sections, and had bored students by forcing them to learn 'ablautesetze' and so on instead of dealing with 'world-moving' problems. Thus the atmosphere was very unfavourable to the powerful Chairs of the older sections. Linguistics then was pushed to the fore at the expense of those 'useless' older sections. The line of reasoning at that time was: Did not Bernstein's findings open the way to a relevant analysis of the social division within society? Was not Chomsky with his objections to the Vietnam War a very good example of the new type of scientist needed: involved in society and bringing about new scientific results? And more important: most of the people who started to study German or a modern foreign language would eventually become secondary school teachers. What useful information did the university provide them with? Were the sound shift or the deeper symbolism of the colours in poetry any good to them? The answer was 'no' — something 'relevant to society' had to be studied.

All this contributed to the rise of linguistics. Some staff posts in the older sections were redefined, some 'Assistenten' suddenly found themselves obliged to hold linguistics seminars. New chairs of linguistics were established, 'dream careers' happened like those of Dieter Wunderlich, a graduate physicist, who five years after he began to study linguistics was a well known author, editor and professor of linguistics (cf. Wunderlich (1974, 417)). Many of the 'Assistenten' who did first year courses had a

rather short education in linguistics.

Inevitably, this enthusiasm for linguistics produced quite a hangover. The first blind appreciation being over, students started to ask why they should learn all these sentence trees and text woods, just as they had asked before about the sound shift. Not only students asked this — the generally rather young, left or left-liberal and society-oriented lecturers asked this, too. If it was true that about 85% of all the students studying German or a foreign language would become secondary school teachers after all — what information should they be provided with?

What was to be done with the newly-established linguistics?

Unfortunately this question was transformed into the question: How can we apply our linguistic theory to language teaching? The further question, whether it would be useful at all to do so was not asked too often, though Chomsky himself in a speech to foreign language teachers in 1965 had warned:

"I am, frankly, rather sceptical about the significance, for the teaching of languages, of such insights and understanding as have been attained in linguistics and psychology. . . . It is difficult to believe that either linguistics or psychology has achieved a level of theoretical understanding that might enable it to support a 'technology' of language teaching". (Chomsky (1966, 43))

Thus quite a number of proposals like the ones mentioned earlier emerged, found their way into the seminars of the universities, and transformations, together with deep structures or phrase-markers, even turned up in textbooks at schools to confuse pupils, parents and older teachers. What actually reached the textbooks in most cases was only the terminology — it was 'in' to wear the linguistic dress — thus, short sentences, in present tense, active, indicative and affirmative were sometimes called 'kernel sentences'. Exercises of the kind: stimulus: 'He goes to the station' — the student has to reply: 'Does he go to the station?', were sold as 'Transformationsübungen'; some people even dared to sell this as something new, though you can find it for example in H. Palmer's *The Principles of Language Study*, first published in 1921 (cf. Palmer (1964, 122ff)).

Now, either producing algorithms which might help a computer, but definitely not a student, to

learn a foreign language, or the use of the new linguistic terms to label long and well-known linguistic entities, were two possibilities of applying the new linguistics to foreign language teaching.

A third possibility was rather more sophisticated: not the actual description of grammar through a generative grammar itself, but the new approach to language in general is relevant for foreign language teaching. Now, what does this mean? After the Second World War, foreign language teaching in the USA and then later in Europe was dominated by the so-called audio-lingual approach. It combines the basic ideas of a Bloomfield/de Saussure type of linguistics and the ruling ideology in learning psychology: behaviorism. The audio-lingual approach replaced different types of the so-called grammar-translation method in foreign language teaching by which, roughly speaking, one learned a modern foreign language in the way one usually learns Latin (by explanation of grammatical rules and translation). Learning in a behavioristic way went together quite well with programmed instruction, with learning technology. Language laboratories will — for a long time — remain the landmark of the audio-lingual approach.

But after some time doubts about the efficacy of the audio-lingual approach came up. And this is where the linguists stepped in. According to his followers, Chomsky had destroyed one pillar of the audio-lingual approach by showing the insufficiency of his taxonomic predecessors. And he successfully attacked the second pillar — behavioristic learning psychology — as well. In a review of Skinner's book *Verbal behavior* he had made it perfectly clear that people do not learn like rats by stimulus and response only, that language learning could not be described in terms of imitation and generalization, but that man has a unique language acquisition device enabling him to learn how to speak and understand (cf. Chomsky (1959)).

And as almost no-one doubted the fact that linguistics and psychology were the two basic sciences for foreign language teaching, and that anything said about foreign language teaching had to be derived from their findings — was it not clear that — with the basic findings in these areas being more than doubtful — the derived method 'audio-lingualism' should be more than doubtful too?

But what was the new method like? Chomsky's ideas were not concrete enough for a method for foreign language teaching to be derived from them. With Chomsky's strong emphasis on rationalism, the mind, the consciousness with its ability to understand explanations, should be reinstated. But nobody wanted the old grammar-translation approach again. What finally emerged was the so-called 'cognitive code learning' approach, a general heading for all kinds of attempts to convey foreign language on a rational base, not mainly by pattern drill in the language laboratory. Though this approach states pretty clearly the way grammar should be taught, it lacks clear statements as far as many other aspects of foreign language learning are concerned.

The battle between audio-lingual foreign language teaching and the cognitive code learning approach provided material for vast numbers of dissertations, publications, etc. The most expensive attempt to settle this question empirically took place in Pennsylvania from 1965 to 1969. At a cost of 300,000 dollars, 104 school classes with nearly 3,500 pupils learning French and German with one or the other method were surveyed. Overall results: the still dominant audio-lingual method did not seem to be much better than the other (cf. Smith (1970)). Another study, somewhat more limited in scope, took place in Gothenburg in Sweden. The question was whether certain grammatical structures would be better acquired when taught explicitly (explained) or implicitly (drilled). The result was rather disappointing at first: no real differences could be found. Only a drastic change in the experimental setting — the test population now consisted of 33, 22 and 12 year olds instead of 13 year olds only as in the first attempt — brought a clear result. Adults learned much more easily and better with the explicit method (i.e. with explanations), the children learned slightly better with the implicit, audio-lingual approach (cf. Ellegård (1973) and Oskarsson (1973)). To rephrase this: obviously it was useless to ask which method was the better; one rather had to ask which method was better for which type of learner (here specified by age alone).⁶

Thus even this type of applied linguistics — mixing the results of linguistics research with those of psychology — does not seem to be sufficient to meet the requirements of such a

complex subject as foreign language teaching.

The latest phase

Meanwhile, from 1970 onwards the book market was flooded with books like *Einführung in die angewandte Linguistik*. These were not subtle and sceptical introductions, scrutinizing the different sections of linguistics in order to find out what possible use could be made of linguistics for language teaching, as D. A. Wilkins' book *Linguistics in language teaching* did, for example, in England in 1972. They were rather uncritical; they stated the fact that linguistics was the basic science for foreign language teaching, therefore language students have to know the latest developments in linguistics⁶. Then the book gave a short compact description of — mostly — generative grammar, added some lines about the value of explicitness for foreign language teaching and that was it.

People who dealt with foreign language teaching in practice felt very uneasy about this development. At the same time the interest in generative grammar in Germany had abated. People either cooked up their own even more explicit grammars or they were increasingly involved in more interdisciplinary approaches to languages.

Yesterday's heroes Bernstein, Chomsky and Searle were replaced by Cicourel, Labov and the late Wittgenstein. At the same time findings like those of the Gothenburg experiment became known, showing that it is obviously not possible to say whether a foreign language teaching method A as such is better than a method B as such. The trust in the basic sciences linguistics and psychology, with their constant changes of paradigms was shattered.

As a reaction to this, the learner was focused upon. For quite a while now he had been neglected, had been the object of a combined linguistics and psychology approach. Now everybody cared about him, about his motivation, for example. The old Montreal studies (cf. Gardner Lambert (1972)) about the importance of the attitude of the learner towards the culture of the target language were re-discussed. That was only the beginning. The fact that a nearly endless number of variables influence foreign language learning entered the minds of more and more people. There was the learner and the teacher, their interaction, their expectations; there was the exam stress, outside stress from parents and peer

groups; there was the number of students in a class, the type of teaching, the material. One had to consider the fact that different materials had different effects on different students of different ages of different social backgrounds with different experiences in learning different languages. And even 'oldies' like intelligence and foreign language learning aptitude came up again.

I think this was a very healthy break-away from standard applied linguistics. The situation has become slightly chaotic and teachers can not rely any more on recipes and prescriptions given to them by scientists. Saying this the other way round: they do not have to force their students any more into methods which are not suitable for them. If teachers refused to do so before, this refusal was always accompanied by a 'bad conscience', because they did something against the ruling foreign language teaching ideology. Now, with these ideologies shattered, they can do more freely what good teachers always have done — provide their information in a way most suitable for their particular group. Science can assist them by providing all sorts of information about different groups and different ways of tailoring material for these different groups.

It looks as if the scientific approach to foreign language learning tends along these lines at the moment. For most researchers in Germany now it is clear that they have to start with the foreign language learning and teaching process itself and describe it with all its variables and the interactions of these. They will use all information possible from fields like linguistics, learning or developmental psychology, sociology, neurophysiology, or whatever. But they will not apply any of the results of these subjects to the foreign language learning and teaching process just because that subject seems to be responsible for it.

As far as institutions are concerned, this change has produced the attempt to set up a subject in its own right: 'Sprachlehr- und lernforschung' (language teaching and learning research), which at the moment in Germany is in the process of gaining recognition. Some lecturer posts for it have been established and, since 1973, it is a recognized area of research, supported by the 'Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft'. Between 1974 and 1976, 2,590,000 DM were used to initiate and run twelve research projects on foreign language teaching (cf. *SLF* (1977, 11ff)).

A progress report for this research area (*SLF* 1977) is firmly stating the relevance of research dealing with the interaction of the different variables in foreign language teaching (cf. ibd. 20) and the necessity of producing results which will contribute immediately to a change in foreign language teaching practice (cf. ibd. 33). At least till 1981, 'Sprachlehr- und lernforschung' will remain one of the supported areas of the 'Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft'.

Notes

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1. cf. for example Wilkins (1972, 216): "It is quite wrong to argue, therefore, that developments in linguistics should cause changes in language teaching. The relationship cannot be one of cause and effect. . . . The ultimate decision has to be the teacher's. He is the only person who has to take all the evidence into account." or Allen Corder (1973, ix) at the beginning of the Edinburgh Course of Applied Linguistics: "the Applied linguist must be a *discriminating* consumer, that is, he must be able to decide what is or is not a relevant theoretical approach for his purposes." or Corder (1973, 10f) "Language teaching . . . is an activity, but teaching languages is not the same activity as applied linguistics. However, if we interpret language teaching in the very broadest sense, to include all the planning and decision-making which takes place outside the classroom, then there may be an element of applied linguistics in all language teaching."
2. For a detailed analysis of the application of generative transformational grammar to foreign language teaching cf. Rösler (1979).
3. I will confine myself to the traditional German universities and leave out the development at the Pädagogischen Hochschulen (teacher training colleges), where, as 'Fachdidaktik', academic examination of the foreign language teaching process was long established.
4. Between 1965 and 1969 the average rise of the number of students per year had been 5.3 per cent, between 1969 and 1972 it was 12 per cent. At the same time, the Verweildauer (the time a student stays at the university) increased; in the language subjects, the average Verweildauer in 1972 was 6.2 years (compared with 5.3 years in 1970). In 1970 there were three times as many university teachers as in 1960. (cf. Knoll (1977, 104ff)).
5. For a critical summary of the different attempts to find an empirical proof of the superiority of either of the approaches cf. Rösler (1977).
6. cf. for example Eichler (1972) or Dirven et al. (1976), whose book starts with "Jeder Fremdsprachenlehrer ist ein Linguist". (1).

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