

PREPARATION OF TEACHING MATERIALS, PRACTICAL  
GRAMMARS, AND DICTIONARIES,  
ESPECIALLY FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGES\*

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The most important new developments in the preparation of materials for the teaching of language, especially for the teaching of a foreign language, have shown themselves in the practical use of the modern linguist's techniques of descriptive structural analyses.

1. The first step in this approach to the preparation of teaching materials has been the making of a satisfactory descriptive structural analysis of the language to be learned. The modern scientific study of language has, within the last thirty years, developed special techniques of descriptive analysis by which a trained linguist can efficiently and accurately arrive at the fundamentally significant matters of structure and sound system amid the bewildering mass of details which constitute the actual rumble of speech. The person who is untrained in the principles and methods of language analysis is not likely to arrive at sound conclusions concerning the actual practices of the speakers he observes. He will certainly not do so efficiently and economically. And the native speaker of a language, unless he has been specially trained to analyze his own language processes, will be more likely to mislead than to help when he tries to make comments about his own language.

In order to provide an adequate guide for the preparation of teaching materials the descriptive analysis of the language to be learned must include also the significant differences as distributed among the important geographical areas and social classes.

2. A second step in this approach to the preparation of teaching materials (not practiced by all those who insist upon the "first step") has been the making of a parallel descriptive structural analysis of the language of the learner. There has been a growing recognition of the necessity of making a careful, systematic comparison of the descriptive structural analysis of

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the native language of the learner with a similar analysis of the language to be learned, as the means of predicting the special centers of difficulty for which the materials must be prepared. A great deal of evidence points to the conclusion that the habits that constitute the control of one's native language are not habits concerning items as items but habits concerning an ordered system of structural contrasts and that these automatic habits through which we manipulate our native language signals with such speed and precision have developed blind spots for contrastive features outside our particular code.

This conclusion has great significance for the preparation of practical teaching materials. In the first place it means that learning a second language after having developed great skill in the habits of our native language is a very different matter from learning our first language when no such habits had been set up. The materials for teaching a second language cannot follow the so-called "natural" method by which a child learns his first language. To be efficient the practice of the learner cannot be left to chance as in free conversation but must systematically make provision for overcoming the special difficulties set up by these blind spots.

In the second place it means that a different set of teaching materials must be prepared for each linguistic background. English, for example, has, of course, its own special set of language signals, but these particular language signals present very different problems for those whose native language is German and those whose native language is Japanese. Even for the speakers of languages as close together as Spanish and Portuguese, English has a considerable range of very different problems.

3. A third step in this approach to the preparation of teaching materials (a somewhat later development, of the last ten to fifteen years, and one not practiced by all those who insist upon one or both of the preceding steps) has been the extension of the descriptive structural analysis beyond the mechanical features of the two languages involved. There has been a vigorous effort to apply with equal systematic rigor, the techniques of a structural approach to a descriptive analysis of the contrastive patterns of the whole social-cultural behavior of the speakers of the two languages.

It is assumed that the ultimate aim of all language learning and teaching is to achieve an understanding as complete as possible between those of differing language backgrounds. Understanding as here used rests upon a two-way communication. It does not mean agreement, nor does it mean acceptance, or

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approval of either the matter or the manner of the communication. It means comprehension and grasp of the full import of the messages communicated. This import lies in the patterns of social-cultural behavior which give significance to the concrete, specific experience of the speakers who use the signals of a language code. The materials for language teaching, therefore, should not ignore, at any stage, the social-cultural content which provides the meanings of the signals.

4. The descriptive structural analysis of the languages involved will reveal much information concerning the significant items of the language signals and the contrastive patterns through which they function. A systematic comparison of two parallel analyses will bring out the strategic contrasts that must be mastered both for production and for reception. Most of those who approach the preparation of teaching materials through such linguistic analyses and comparisons make a sharp distinction between acquiring knowledge about the language to be learned and developing the habits necessary for its practical use. For the preparation of teaching materials aimed at the control of a language for practical use the descriptive analyses and the systematic comparisons constitute essential but only preliminary steps: To be effective, the results of these analyses and comparisons must be embedded in exercises made up of complete utterances carrying on the communication essential to real live social situations. The teaching materials and teaching practice must lead to automatic habits of language production and response rather than to mere knowledge about the language.

In similar fashion the raw results of the comparison of the descriptive analyses of two sets of social-cultural patterns do not constitute a separate body of material to be taught as information. In some way this social-cultural content which gives full meaning to the 'talk' of the people who have used the foreign language all their lives must be vividly realized imaginatively by learners who have had a very different life experience. In some way it must be incorporated in the meanings of all the utterances of the materials to be learned. The language materials themselves must gradually build up in the learner the significant features of a very different way of grasping experience.

### *Dictionaries*

Concerning the making of dictionaries, especially the making of practical dictionaries for language learners, there has been much vigorous discussion and a variety of suggestions for change, but very few of the published dictionaries have incorporated

really significant innovations. Linguists have contributed to the historical dictionaries and the dialect dictionaries, and have helped the editors of practical dictionaries to improve the soundness of the linguistic information they published. But the makers of two-language dictionaries and of practical dictionaries for foreigners have, on the whole, continued along traditional lines without exploring the possibilities for useful changes built upon the developing new knowledge of linguists.

1. Considerable discussion has centered upon a few problems of the selections of vocabulary entries.

a. Through what specific criteria or general principles of judgment can editors determine the most useful lexical items for inclusion in a practical dictionary? Very few dictionaries can attempt to include the whole vocabulary of the language—there must be a selection. Word frequencies as established by word-counts have many short-comings. The meaning and significance of the various ratings given in a particular word-count can be determined only after an exhaustive study of the details of the processes by which the counts were made. Semantic counts have a validity even more doubtful. Besides, the relation of frequency of occurrence to usefulness in any particular kind of dictionary must be established, not simply taken for granted. On the advanced levels of language mastery the student usually seeks dictionary help concerning the less frequent items, not those of common occurrence.

Nor can one assume a direct correlation between the total number of vocabulary entries and general usefulness. The principles of the selection, in connection with the scale and the nature of the treatment of the included items, offer more significant features for evaluation.

b. In spite of the modern insistence that the materials of speech constitute the 'language,' most practical dictionaries have selected their materials from writing and literature. Only a few of the vocabulary entries carry the label 'colloquial,' and those so marked are often regarded as of a lower level. Frequent discussions have led to a questioning of this approach. Should the basic content vocabulary be that of the language of speech and so assumed without special labels, and the comparatively few items that do not usually occur orally be marked 'literary' or 'bookish'?

c. The vocabulary entries of most practical dictionaries consist only of 'words' (free morphemes). To what extent should such dictionaries include bound morphemes as full vocabulary entries? Would a practical dictionary be more helpful to the learners of a language if it were strictly a morpheme rather

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than a 'word' dictionary? Such a dictionary for English would include general explanations not only of such obvious meaning units as *-less* which occurs in such words as *careless, faithless, priceless, hairless, friendless*, and *-ful* in *careful, faithful, mindful, wistful, masterful, mournful, bashful, handful*, but also the multitude of other bound units of which the meanings are much more difficult to grasp and for which at present no easily accessible adequate treatment exists.

d. At the other extreme, the question arises as to how freely combinations of free morphemes should be included as separate vocabulary entries. A car that *runs down* a child is doing something quite different from one that is *running down* a street. A *run down* neighborhood has characteristics that have nothing in common with either of the two situations in which the same two words *run down*, have just been used. English has hundreds of such combinations that form problems which cannot be dismissed with the easy assertion that they belong in a list of idioms. Existing dictionaries give little help to students, and dictionary makers need guidance.

2. Discussion has centered not only upon problems of the selection of vocabulary entries but also upon problems of the treatment of meanings.

a. In a practical dictionary is it possible or even desirable to keep from overlapping the functions of an encyclopedia on the one hand, and, on the other, the functions of a grammar?

For maximum usefulness should a practical dictionary include the encyclopedic information necessary to bring out the social-cultural content of meaning? The social-cultural content covered by any lexical item will, of course, have differing features of significance for each separate linguistic background. For all English speakers *breakfast* is 'the first meal of the day,' but the actual content of the characteristic experience covered by this term differs for those who use it in southern England, in Scotland, and in north-central United States. The American *drug-store* is not the *chemist's shop* of England. The *robin* and the *lark* in the United States are quite different birds from the *robin* and the *lark* in England. How far should a practical dictionary go beyond a strictly linguistic function and incorporate explanations that bring out distinctive features of social-cultural content?

In English, as in many other languages, some words, as special items, signal grammatical meanings. They function as a definite part of the structural signals. How much of these structural uses should dictionaries include? Some 'function words' have both structural uses and lexical content. In English,

*on, at, in, to, from*, differ in lexical content, but signal the same type of structural connection. The special formula *have + to + 'infinitive'* signals a meaning of 'necessity' or 'obligation,' but the word *have* itself, in this situation, has no lexical meaning. Will a practical dictionary be more or less useful if it includes rather full treatment of the grammatical meanings of 'function words'?

b. All dictionaries must deal with the problem of the multiple meanings of words. The clues to the precise meaning out of many which attaches to any particular word in an utterance unit lie, of course, in the so-called 'context.' How far should practical dictionaries go in sharpening the method of using such 'contexts' by indicating precisely the characteristic minimum lexical sets that operate as distinguishing clues for each of the multiple meanings?

c. Considerable diversity of opinion marks the discussions of the kind of 'definitions' most useful for practical two-language dictionaries. Very common in actual use, but most often condemned, is the practice of seeking word 'equivalents' in the two languages and giving one or more of these 'equivalents' as the definition. The difficulties for the learner arising from this method accumulate and increase the more he attempts to use the language productively. The extensions of application he must necessarily make in new situations will inevitably be in accord with the area of meaning of the so-called equivalents in his own language rather than in accord with the area of meaning of the item in the target language.

Definitions by explanation, with a variety of illustrations, in the learner's native language avoid many of the difficulties of the word-equivalent procedure, but they require more time on the part of the student and a dictionary of considerably greater bulk.

Explanations by means of examples of sentences and groups of connected sentences in the target language, giving self-defining context, seem to furnish the most satisfactory learning approach. They require, however, some degree of control of the foreign language by the learner and also a dictionary of considerable size.

What scale of treatment must a practical dictionary have to be linguistically sound and satisfactorily useful?

### *Grammars*

The basic issue in the discussions concerning the content of practical grammars for foreign language teaching centers in the divergent views concerning the nature of grammar itself.

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1. One approach, of long tradition, starts with the meaning of the utterance as a whole; breaks up that meaning into segments of meaning, to which are attached special technical names; and then identifies in any particular utterance the precise words and word groups to which these technical names apply. Definitions are based upon these meanings and stated in terms of meaning. (See, for example, the many definitions of the sentence, old and new, that strive to state the 'essence of the sentence,' the common definitions of the 'part of speech,' and the definitions of syntactic relationships.) Grammatical analysis of this kind cannot begin until the total linguistic meaning of the utterance has been established. Learning practical grammar, in this sense, has meant primarily achieving receptive and productive control of these special technical names.

2. Another approach to practical grammar attempts to summarize in systematic fashion the details of the forms of words and the arrangements in which they occur in a language. Latin nouns are often grouped in five 'declensions,' with five case forms for the singular and five for the plural. Adjectives are declined in three genders. Verbs are classified in four 'conjugation' groups. Students learn to decline the nouns and to conjugate the verbs. They learn the rules that certain prepositions 'take' or 'govern' the ablative case, or the accusative, or the dative. They learn the usual positions in which the various elements of the Latin sentence appear, especially that the verb often comes at the end.

Learning grammar in this sense has meant learning the systematic summaries of the forms, and the rules for their application.

3. A third approach to grammar arises out of the attempt to find all the various kinds of signals a language uses to fulfil its function of mediating meaning. It assumes that the 'words' themselves, the lexical items, which, as units, attach to bundles of experience, signal a definite part of the meaning. It assumes also that another part of the meaning is signalled by contrastive patterns of the form and arrangement. This part of the meaning has been called 'structural meaning' as differentiated from lexical meaning. *The hunters killed the wolf* differs from *The hunters killed the bear* in lexical meaning only; *The hunters killed the wolf* differs from *The wolf killed the hunters* in structural meaning only. From this approach, the grammar of a language consists of those devices of contrastive form and arrangement (including intonation) which signal this particular layer of meaning called structural meaning. It assumes that these signals are all formal matters that can be described in

physical terms, and that, as significant signals, these formal matters are always in contrast.

From this point of view, also, a practical grammar would deal only with those contrastive arrangements that function as structural signals. In English, for example, such a grammar would not describe all the possible arrangements of 'word-order' in English sentences, but only those contrastive patterns of form classes that actually function to signal specific *grammatical* meanings. Rhetorical effects of various arrangements would not be included. In Latin or in Old English, word-order has practically no grammatical signalling value. In modern English and in Chinese, it forms a large and important part of the signalling code.

To be of most use in the practical learning of a particular language, such a grammar should describe the structural signals of the target language in comparison with the structural signals of the language of the learner.