

LINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF THE READING PROGRAM¹

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The reading expert must have more than average competence in a number of specialized fields—psychology, physiology, sociology, cultural anthropology. And of course he must understand the practical problems of educational methodology.

But there is another discipline, directly related to problems of learning to read, which can help the reading expert to define those problems and reach practical solutions. That is the science of linguistics. This science tries to deal objectively and systematically with the nature of language in general and with the structure of specific languages. Some of the principles that have been developed in this field have a direct bearing on the work of elementary education and adult literacy programs.

It is the purpose of the following remarks to suggest some of the ways in which an understanding of the nature of language and its relation to the writing system can contribute to efficiency in the teaching of reading.

One of the most fundamental principles has to do with the definition of language. Entirely apart from the letters and other symbols used for recording it on paper, every language is a system by itself, a system primarily for transmitting messages in which the signals are composed of sounds made with the human vocal apparatus. Because we are engulfed in a highly literate culture, we find it difficult to apprehend the essential unity and independence of the spoken language apart from the writing system with which we have been trained to associate it.

But it is precisely in order to establish this association in the mind of the child learning to read that it is essential for the teacher to make it clear that language and writing are distinct systems. Only in this way is it possible to appreciate the extent to which the writing is an accurate representation of the

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language and to recognize the points of correspondence and divergence between the two systems.

Some of the figures of speech we use in speaking about written symbols reveal our essentially visual orientation toward our language. We say for example that the letter *c* has at least two different sounds. We have become so accustomed to this manner of speaking that we forget the real situation and act as if letters actually had sounds. It might help to give our children a more vivid picture of the relation between language and writing if we avoided this mode of expression and said rather that we use the letter *c* in writing to represent two different speech sounds. To say that we "pronounce letters" is a complicated metaphorical way of putting it and tends to create in the student's mind an erroneous conception of language.

As a result of this confusion, students in the upper grades and in college tend to regard written forms as a pure and ideal language, of which spoken forms are a degraded imitation. By reversing this point of view, we can make a conscious effort to think of the printed page as an imperfect record or reminder of actual speech. Thus we may be able to enhance the prestige of the spoken word and perhaps pave the way to a keener appreciation of language as a medium of artistic expression.

As an example of our failure to distinguish between language and writing, consider the meaning of the terms "vowel" and "diphthong." Are these sounds or written symbols? When the reading manuals tell us about "long" and "short" vowels, they must be referring to sounds. Therefore, in order to make it clear at all times whether we are talking about the language or the writing system, it would seem advisable to refer to the symbols *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u* as "vowel letters." The *ai* in *said* and the *ea* in *head* might be called "combinations of letters." Then the terms "vowel" and "diphthong" could be reserved exclusively for reference to sounds or combinations of sounds.

In our campaign for a better understanding of what language means, one thing we can do is appeal to the textbook writers not to make statements about the writing system as if they were describing the language. Students have enough trouble finding out what English is like; it only adds to their difficulties if they are told that "there are twenty-six letters in the English language."

In this connection, we might also re-examine the doctrine of silent letters, and consider how this term is used in describing the correspondences between speech and spelling. For example, since the sound of *n* is sometimes represented by the letters *kn*, as in *know*, one might choose to say that the sound

LINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF THE READING PROGRAM

of *n* is represented in such cases by the letter *n* preceded by a silent *k*. Notice that this is a special technical use of the term "silent," applied to letters that do not correspond to any sound in the spoken word.

But even this specified use of the term is difficult to apply consistently. The *y* in the graphic form *pay*, for example, cannot be regarded as a silent letter, since it corresponds to the actual *y*-like sound heard at the end of this word. If we say that the *y* in *pay* is silent, we could also say that the *n* in *pan* is silent and that *a* before "silent *n*" represents a special sound. The question of the *w* in *know* and *now* presents a similar problem: we can hardly say that the *w* is silent, since it does stand for an actual sound that appears at the end of the words represented by these spellings.

The concept of silent letters may be a convenient one, but the term is misleading; it cannot be defined with any precision; and the usefulness of the idea in the teaching of reading has been seriously limited by its wide misapplication.

A more practical problem in our appraisal of the reading program is that of isolating and defining the essential task that the pupil faces in acquiring this skill. It appears from the teaching manuals that a considerable amount of time and effort is expended in teaching the children to distinguish different sounds, meanings, and grammatical forms. This seems like a needless diversion from the central goal of teaching them to read. The most reasonable thing would be to proceed directly to the essential matter of associating sequences of letters with sequences of sounds. In dealing with normal children, we can assume that they already have adequate control of the sound system and the grammatical structure of their native language.

After learning to read, of course, children will enrich their knowledge of the language by enlarging their vocabulary. They will learn hundreds of new words and idioms through their reading both in school and out. But in the early stages of learning to read, the purpose is not to add to the child's stock of words. In fact, most modern primers expressly avoid words that are not likely to be familiar. This is in accord with the primary goal of simply learning to read words that they already have in their speech.

In view of this it seems rather wasteful to spend time and effort "clarifying the meanings" of words like *this*, *that*, *it*, *he*, *she*, *they*, *but*, *so*, *is*, *was*, *ride*, *etc.* The meanings of such words have been firmly and permanently established in the child's mind long before he comes to school and are constantly being reinforced by dozens of repetitions every day. What is the use

of teaching the child something he already knows? Once the association has been established for the pupil between the written form *ride* and the speech signal that this form represents, the reading problem is over. To explain that this word is in some environments a verb and in others a noun is wasted effort. The child is fully aware of that if he speaks English. To be sure, he may not know the terms verb and noun, but the technical terminology of grammar is irrelevant at this stage.

Another activity that is puzzling to those interested in the reading program is the training given in "auditory perception." It must be assumed that the children know English when they come to school, and exercises designed to develop auditory perception of sounds in the language do not seem appropriate in the process of learning to read.

A sample exercise of this sort is described as follows: "To promote auditory perception of the long and short sounds of the letter *i*, pronounce the following words and have the pupils tell whether they hear a long or a short *i* in each word: *find*, *fine*, *Bill*," etc. Obviously no child is going to have difficulty distinguishing the sounds of such words. If he did, he would not be able to speak English. Apparently the object of such an exercise is to train the child to use the terms "long" and "short" in this special technical sense, rather than to promote auditory perception.

Some of the exercises that have been used in the interests of auditory perception involve more than a mere waste of time; they involve the danger of intolerance in matters of dialect variation due to geographical origin. In these days when families move about the country a good deal, we must be prepared for the kind of situation in which one child may distinguish *pin* and *pen* for example, and another may not. In the latter case, it simply means that the child speaks a variety of English in which these two words sound the same, and the only reasonable course is to accept the fact and realize that we cannot change his natural speech. Many of us do not distinguish *whale* and *wail*, *cot* and *caught*, or *morning* and *mourning*; and it would be useless (if not un-American) to insist that a child should make such distinctions artificially if they are not part of his regional heritage. In all such matters, children will imitate their contemporaries, in spite of any effort on the teacher's part. We can teach them to read, but we cannot change the phonetic structure of their language.

Some linguists have carried to an extreme this attitude of tolerance toward dialectal variation and have earned a reputation of radicalism because of it. It is also true that some of

LINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF THE READING PROGRAM

them, in their enthusiasm for linguistics, have tried to give the impression that teachers of English and reading would do well to forget about the psychologists and the specialists in elementary education and let the linguists take over. It would be unfortunate if the critical comments made here were interpreted as supporting such extremists. The only point is that the language specialists really have made certain contributions toward the building of a broad conceptual framework for dealing with language problems and that some of the tasks of elementary education thus appear to be more clearly defined.

One thing that comes into sharper focus is the idea that language is a matter of speech activity--the way people talk. Writing is an irregular and fragmentary notation to serve as a reminder of what has been said. A better understanding of the nature of language and the relationship between language and writing can help all of us--teachers, textbook writers, or just plain citizens--to see more clearly what the learner faces in striving toward literacy and can make for greater efficiency in achieving that goal.