

AS WE SEE IT

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THE MOST IMPORTANT principle underlying the work of the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan is the belief that only with satisfactory basic materials can one efficiently begin the study of a foreign language. No matter what happens later, the ease and speed of attainment in the early stages of the learning of a language will depend primarily upon the selection and sequence of the materials to be studied.

When the materials of language study are mentioned the ordinary person and often language teachers think primarily of learning "words." For them the basic materials consist chiefly of vocabulary items to be memorized. It is perhaps inevitable that it should be so. Our mastery of the "words" of our own language is a constantly developing mastery. Knowledge of new words and of new meanings keeps increasing as we grow older and we are often very conscious of this growth and change. It is quite natural therefore that most of us, thinking about language, should consider only vocabulary mastery, that part of our language development of which we have been conscious, and should ignore all those matters which became unconscious habits so early that we cannot remember anything of the process of their development.

In learning a new language, however, the chief problem of materials is not at first that of choosing vocabulary items. It is of course possible and desirable to find the few hundred words and meanings most useful in the particular situations in which the language is being learned and to build materials that will provide enough repetition of each item to insure systematic and efficient learning. Even in the beginning stages there must be enough words to satisfy a limited range of communication, and for efficient materials the choice of these items cannot be left to chance or any haphazard selection.

The basic problems however in the early stages of learning a language are first, the mastery of the sound system—to understand the stream of speech, to hear the distinctive sound features, and to

approximate their production—and second, the mastery of the features of arrangement that constitute the structure of the language. These are the matters that the native speaker as a child has early acquired as unconscious habits. They must become automatic habits of the learner of a new language. Satisfactory basic materials to begin the study of a foreign language must rest upon an accurate and complete record of these unconscious habits of the native speaker.

The native speaker himself however, unless he has been specially trained to observe and analyze his own language processes, finds great difficulty in describing the special characteristics either of the sounds he makes or of the structural devices he uses. His comments about his own language more often mislead than help a foreigner. On the other hand the modern scientific study of language has, within the last twenty years, developed special techniques for descriptive analysis that enable one much more efficiently and accurately to arrive at the fundamentally significant matters of structure and sound system. It is not enough to have a descriptive analysis of only the language to be learned. The most efficient materials grow out of a scientific descriptive analysis of the language to be learned *carefully compared with a parallel descriptive analysis of the native language of the learner*. Only a comparison of this kind will reveal the fundamental trouble spots that demand special exercises and will separate the basically important features from a bewildering mass of linguistic details.

One principle of the more recent approach to linguistic analysis has contributed especially to the changing of many of our earlier views of what matters are particularly significant for the learning of a language. It insists that language must not be dealt with as if it were a collection of separate items, but rather as an integrated system—that the phonetic features and the items of form and arrangement have significance only as they function in the patterns of the system as a whole.

Some matters of the sound system will furnish an illustration that should help to bring out the meaning of these general statements. The human vocal apparatus can make and phoneticians can describe a tremendous number of different sounds. In English, as in every language that we know, there are hundreds of differences of sound

of which the ordinary speaker is not aware. The [p] in *pin* differs from the [p] in *spin* and both are different from the [p] in *nip* or *top*. The [p] in *pin* is followed by a puff of breath which the others do not have. The [k] in *kill* differs from the [k] in *coal*. In *coal* the [k] is made with the back of the tongue touching the roof of the mouth much farther back than with the [k] of *kill*. The [k] of *cool* is made with rounded lips. Practical phonetic analysis has in the past devoted itself to distinguishing differences of sound such as these. More recently we do not stop with this type of phonetic analysis of separate items. We want to know which of the hundreds of different sound features that we can isolate and describe are significant in the system of the language—which, for example, occur as the sole distinguishing features of different words.

We know now that, although the total number of differences in sound that may occur in a language runs up into hundreds, no language that has been described uses more than twenty to fifty contrastive patterns of sound to distinguish separate words; and—what is of especial importance—no two languages (not even two languages as close together as Spanish and Portuguese) use the same set. We in English use very freely the difference between [s] and [z] as in *ice-eyes*; *rice-rise*; *niece-knees*; *cease-seize*; *race-raise*; *lacy-lazy*. We use also the difference between [n] and [ŋ] as in *ran-rang*; *kin-king*; *sin-sing*; *run-rung*. Spanish has these differences too, but Spanish never uses either of them as we do as the sole distinction between separate words.

These facts have very practical significance for the learning of a foreign language. If two sounds are distinctive points on the pattern in my native language—that is, if they are used to distinguish separate words—then it is easy for me to hear somewhat similar differences in another language and to produce these distinctions systematically in speaking. If however the two sounds are never used in my native language—that is, if they are used to distinguish variants of one distinctive sound, then they are (like the difference of the English [k] in *kill* and the [k] in *call*) very difficult for me even to hear in learning another language where they are distinctive.

Not only are the distinctive sound features of a language very few, but also they occur only in a very limited number of characteristic sequences. The sound [ŋ] as in *king*, *sing*, *rang* occurs only

after vowels; it never appears initially in a syllable. Of the more than a hundred consonant clusters in English only [st], [sp], and [sk] occur in both initial and final position.

These facts also have practical significance. It is easy for me to pronounce sounds in the characteristic sequences in which they occur in my language; it is difficult for me to pronounce them in sequences which do not occur in the patterns of my language. Final [ŋ] as in *king* is easy; to pronounce this word in reverse, starting with [ŋ] not preceded with a vowel, requires practice. In Spanish the clusters [st] [sp] never occur initially as they do in English. A Spanish speaker learning English finds it difficult therefore not to pronounce a vowel [ɛ] before such English words as *study* and *Spanish*. We in English have difficulty in pronouncing such clusters as [gd] [lpt] [lkt] [lmz] in initial positions; we have no difficulty, however, with these same combinations as syllable finals as in *wagged*, *sagged*; or *helped*, *gulped*; or *sulked*, *milked*; or *films*, *elms*.

In the past, teachers have talked much of the ease and difficulty of particular language sounds and sound combinations, assuming that the ease or the difficulty was inherent in the phonetic nature of the sound itself—its mode of articulation. We now know that there are no difficult language sounds *per se*. Ease or difficulty of pronunciation turns out to be a matter of the patterning of the distinctive sound features in the characteristic sequences of a language.

It is this kind of analysis applied to all the features of the sound system and structural arrangement of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a similar analysis of the language of the learner, that underlies the basic materials used by the English Language Institute in its intensive courses in English. "Foreign" language teaching is always a matter of teaching a specific "foreign" language with its special structural features to students who have a specific "native" language background with fundamentally different structural features. To be efficient, separate and differing sets of materials for learning English must be used for those of each different linguistic background.

It is not enough simply to have the results of such thoroughgoing analyses and comparisons. These results will determine the really significant matters that must be mastered in the first stages of learning, but they must be implemented with adequate specific

practice materials through which the learner may develop the new set of habits that constitute the foreign language. They must be incorporated in useful sentences to be practiced and repeated until the structural patterns become so fixed that all expression in the new language will follow these channels without conscious choice. Structural patterns can be pointed out and described, but a study of the statements of the pattern, making them matters of conscious knowledge, must never be allowed to become a substitute for constant practice and accurate repetition of the sentences themselves.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND NOTES

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L.B.S.