

## PRIORITIES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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During the past few decades, the professed aims and methods of language teaching in general and of the teaching of English, in particular, have been continuously changing in this country, and a major tendency within the general change has been a slow, but steady, shift of emphasis from a passive skills orientation toward a more active one.<sup>1</sup> Verbal communication and, thus, communicative skills have been of ever increasing concern for the language teaching profession.<sup>2</sup> It has also been realized that such a shift presupposes a corresponding change in teaching methods, which have therefore been replaced or adjusted accordingly, although perhaps not, or not yet, altogether satisfactorily.

But quite apart from the methodology which was a major preoccupation at one time, the profession is still left with some basic myths, prejudices, and ignorance concerning material and problem selection and grading or, to put it simply, the question of "What to teach, when, and why?" Despite some efforts directed at change in this area, most of our language books, programs, syllabuses, courses and requirements are still based, at least in part, upon preconceived and unquestioned ideas on not only a number of items of grammatical problems, elements of pronunciation and so on, but even on a vague and poorly defined "order of difficulty", i.e. some sort of a grading practice. Most of these ideas originate from, and were probably well suited to, the times when a detailed and thorough understanding of grammar was the primary objective, or part of it, and not *a means*, as it is supposed to be now. In spite of a number of movements aimed at reducing the dominance of grammar from the 1920s or even from earlier, onward,<sup>3</sup> as well as a lot of lip service paid to various "new ideas" about how to learn to speak a language — English, in this particular case; it seems that *the status of grammar* has seldom been seriously threatened in practice. In fact, the teaching material in many course books and other language books is still basically organized around grammar, which, in addition, is presented along well established lines of an order of difficulty, imagined or real. An overwhelming part of the background research, including the English-Hungarian contrastive projects, have dealt, and still deal, with grammar,<sup>4</sup> to which, incidentally, an average of over 50% of a school teacher's total teaching time is devoted in some way or other. In addition, most test requirements give the impression that an ability to differentiate between points — often fine points — of grammar is, by far, the most important component of a general language proficiency, including communicative competence. True, the volume of teaching pronunciation has been greatly increased, but there again we seem to be dependent on certain basics which therefore always go unquestioned (see below).

The problem, of course, is not with the teaching of grammar itself; grammar should obviously be taught, and the amount should vary, among other things, with the pur-

pose of learning. The question is *what*, other than grammar, should be taught concurrently or, possibly, primarily. If we try to account for some of the causes of the inefficiency and occasional poor results of teaching, then instead of, or at least in addition to, the question of "How much grammar?", we should ask ourselves something like the following: "What are the factors, in an actual communicative situation, that most hinder, obstruct, or otherwise affect communication?" Or, to put it more simply and personally, if I, a Hungarian student of English, want to carry on a conversation with an Englishman (an American etc.), what are the things that I have to watch closely to be able to get my messages through?

A long-term experiment was recently started, the purpose of which is to help find out how grammatical and non-grammatical errors share in accounting for various types and degrees of communication failures. Somewhat contradictorily to grammar-based expectations, the preliminary findings suggest that many grammatical errors, including some of those usually considered most serious in language teaching, tend to affect very little or hardly at all the intelligibility or comprehensibility of the message, while other errors frequently cause partial or total misunderstanding or unintelligibility. In terms of the relationship between communicative success or failure, on the one hand, and the share of grammatical and non-grammatical errors, on the other, several types of correlation may be found, which, in a simplified manner, can be summed up in four basic relationships: (1) Good grammar — good communication; (2) Good grammar — poor communication; (3) Poor grammar — good communication and; (4) Poor grammar — poor communication.

Of the four, it is naturally cases 2, and 3, that are of interest here, as they indicate that fairly good communication may well pivot on factors other than necessarily good grammatical usage. The question, of course, is precisely what these factors are. Not considering, for the moment, pronunciation and various non-linguistic features such as gestures and body language, errors that can override the significance of grammatical ones in communication may be generally grouped into two basic classes: (1) those related to semantic factors; and (2) those which owe culturally derived or based.

The first of the above categories of error is the seemingly familiar class of semantic-lexical, or lexico-semantic errors. A good portion of these errors are caused by interference from native Hungarian, which, in turn, is generated by various differences between the semantic structures of English and Hungarian, between lexical items, semantic fields, and collocations. A typical example of a type of error caused by semantic-lexical interference is:

"You have been unveiled" for situationally appropriate

"You have been exposed" (Cp.: H. „leleplez”).

On a superficial level at least, such and similar errors are common knowledge for the practicing teacher, but their significance is too often dismissed, as it is not always realized that they can do far more damage to the message, especially if they occur multiplicatively, than would possibly be done by various grammatical errors.

The second class of errors can be covered by the blanket term "cultural". These are often less tangible and more complex errors than those belonging in the first class, and are caused by a multitude of subtle and not so subtle differences between the target culture and the source culture, which, in the case of Hungarian and English, are especially numerous and far-reaching, although relatively seldom manifest, and mostly not easy to identify.

The following example illustrates one of the many types of errors falling into this category of errors. A so-called „végzős" (graduating) student-teacher in a Hun-

garian university once put the following question to a visiting American educator: "Do your students also hate going down to the country to teach?" (Cp. H. „Önöknél sem szívesen mennek le a hallgatók vidékre tanítani?"). Whereby he produced a question obviously incomprehensible to his interlocutor, despite the fact that the sentence was correct in any linguistic sense. The source of the error in this particular case was the erroneous underlying assumption that a „főváros versus vidék" ("capital versus the rest of the country") type dichotomy is a cultural universal, which, however it is not, in fact, if anything, it is much closer to being a characteristic cultural "Hungarianism". In other words, what we have here is an example of „cultural accent" caused by cultural interference.

The implications are manifold and may have many ramifications. The immediate and obvious, point is that there should be much more attention given, and significance attached, to certain lexical, semantic, and cultural components in acquisition as well as contrastive research, and eventually in teaching itself. This goes emphatically for the cultural component, as this is an unexplored area, while some results have already been achieved in the field of lexical-semantic studies.

## II.

In an attempt to be fair to contemporary teaching practices, I mentioned earlier that pronunciation is one area where a number of changes *have* been taking place, if nothing else, by the simple fact that a lot more pronunciation is being taught today than was done before. But here again, it seems that we are preoccupied with certain things while others, more important or at least equally so, do not receive adequate attention and this, I believe, is what accounts for many of the failures in teaching Hungarian students of English a so-called good accent.

The case in point is the sound system, i.e. the English sounds mainly in themselves, which on the average take up at least as much teaching time in most of our schools as all the other features of pronunciation together, and possibly more. The sounds in English have been described most accurately, and this, coupled with a handy contrastive or comparative approach, makes them highly suitable for systematic teaching. This does not mean, however, that a detailed knowledge of isolated sounds is also the most important element of a generally good pronunciation. Quite important, but by no means the most important. It is possible, on the one hand, to speak fluently and with a reasonably good general acoustic effect with only a moderate to fair mastery of individual sounds — with a Hungarian-type trilled "r", for example — provided the speaker has learned how to combine them into larger units and has sufficiently acquired the basic patterns of stress, rhythm and intonation. On the other hand, the learner's listening comprehension may be affected more seriously by his lack of proficiency in any of these latter features than by an incomplete mastery of individual sounds. For some examples of simple and not infrequent sound combinations, consider the alveolar fricatives [s, z] and stops [t, d] plus the palatal semivowel [j] combinations, optionally and in rapid speech mostly coalescing into palato-alveolars [ʃ, ʒ] and affricates [tʃ, dʒ] respectively, as in the following:

1. [ə, fj əɾ]  
[əfko:ɾfjʊkæn]
2. [itwəʒjɔ:ɾfalt]  
[huseʒjʊkænt]

this year, and  
of course you can  
it was your fault, and in  
who says you can't,

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>3. [wountʃtə]<br/>[ouvertʃər]<br/>American English, and</p> <p>4. [husedʒukud]<br/>[edʒukeifn]<br/>clusively, in American English.</p> | <p>won't you, and<br/>overture, this latter especially in</p> <p>who said you could, and<br/>education, again tendentiously, but not ex-</p> |
|---|--|

Such and similar instances of assimilation can heavily interfere with the listening comprehension of the learner who does not expect them or does not know *where* to expect them, and yet, except for a few university handouts, we seem to have hardly any teaching material — and possibly very few language courses — dealing with them in significant detail.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, generations of Hungarian learners of English have been producing such displeasing and yet easily correctable errors as [ə, zwei] (this way), [blagbɔ:rd] (blackboard), [d, zlike] (dislike), and even [bazik] (basic), transferring a type of Hungarian regressive assimilation not normally operating in English, apparently because they were never taught the differences between English and Hungarian assimilation rules.

Finally, for the case of stress and rhythm. We cannot be blamed in *this* area, we might hope, as we now more or less systematically teach these once elusive components. The question is: how; and what are the priorities? For one thing, we tend to concentrate on weakly stressed and unstressed syllables in practicing word, as well as sentence, stress, as these are expected to present (and they do present, in fact) special difficulties for Hungarian learners — as for most other learners, for that matter. But again, while aiming at an important target, we could well be missing another one which is at least equally important. It is clear that an undue stressing of non-or weakly stressed syllables can produce the effect of a “heavy accent”, as it were, especially when coupled with wrong or inappropriate intonation patterns, but we know very little of the extent to which this type of overstressing tends to affect the communicative value of the utterances. At the same time, *failing to stress* certain syllables that should normally be strongly stressed can easily cause a total or partial failure in communicating the message.<sup>6</sup> In the case of many Hungarian learners of English, a number of errors of this general class are especially disturbing as they are quite frequent and often systematic.

Let us briefly recall at this point that Hungarian, in a general comparison with English, is a language of “initial position primary stress” not only in terms of individual words but also in its various collocations and other two-or three-word compounds, among them the so-called „jelzős főnevek” or attributive plus noun compounds, and many even longer units, including various breadth-groups and sentences. This often lends Hungarian speech the impression of a generally descending structure or falling cadence, to put it somewhat non-technically, as illustrated for instance by the following sentence:

„Nagyon szép hangja van ennek a lánynak.” as compared to English “This girl has a beautiful voice.”

Compared to this type of possible, or optional, and in many cases mandatory, single-stressing, English speech is mainly characterized by a double stressing, or triple and multiple stressing of units of corresponding lengths. An overwhelming majority of two-word compounds, notably the already mentioned „jelzős főnevek” — attributives plus nouns, are double stressed. In various contexts, the second element is more strongly stressed, or may even bear the only full stress, whereby the compound is occasionally single-stressed on the second element, a reverse image of the correspond-

ing Hungarian compound. Thus, while in Hungarian we have „*piros toll*”, „*jó fiú*”, „*szép hang*”, „*Mátyás király*”, *New York*, etc., in English we may get a red *pen*, a good *boy*, a nice *voice*, King *George*, and *New York*. The same goes for instance for Romance-type inverted compounds, as in “Secretary *General*”, “heir *apparent*”, or “notary *public*”, and further, to a number of other two-element units including such questions as English “What’s *that?*” as opposed to Hungarian „*Mi az?*”

Three-member compounds, not surprisingly, tend to receive their strongest stresses on their last members, while the first ones are also usually stressed, as for instance in “Commander-in-*Chief*”, “*merry-go-round*”, or “*New York City*”. This, in marked contrast to softly falling Hungarian cadencies, often gives English speech the general impression of a pulsating and sometimes vigorous rhythm or beat, whereby, in addition to differences in individual stress patterns, we can discern a difference in the general nature of stressing in the two languages.

Relatively few Hungarian students of English seem to fully realize even the basics of English stressing and rhythm, let alone learn them satisfactorily, and one of the reasons is obviously the fact that this area receives less attention than would be justified and necessary in research and in teaching.

Meanwhile, many Hungarian language courses, teaching institutions, and in fact even teacher training colleges and universities continue to turn out or graduate students with an unbalanced proficiency in the language, the communicative usability of which is limited. It may take some time to significantly change this situation, and the changing process could be accelerated by a rethinking of some of the priorities in teaching and in the background research.

## Notes

1. The present study is a revised and somewhat abbreviated version of a paper read recently at a language teaching conference in Pécs.
2. Studies on various aspects of communicative language teaching abound. For some representative works, see e.g.: RIVERS, W. M., *Communicating Naturally in a Second Language*, CUP, 1983; BRUMFIT, CH., *Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching*, Cambridge University Press 1984; and, in Hungary, any of a number of studies by P. MEDGYES, as e.g.: *Angoltanításunk fő gondjai* (The main concerns of teaching English in this country), *Pedagógiai Szemle*, XXXIV., 1984.
3. Ultimately, the idea of the „szóbeli kezdő szakasz” (initial oral phase) in Hungarian secondary schools, goes back to pre-war studies of the direct method, which in turn go back to Berlitz’ classic work in the late 19th century.
4. Of the dozen or so studies to be published within the framework of the English—Hungarian Contrastive Project, there is only one that *does not* deal with grammar and closely related matters. Budapest, forthcoming.
5. In „András-Stephanides”, one of the most widely used university textbooks in teaching English pronunciation in Hungary, less than one page is devoted to these types of assimilation, while much more space is given to questions which probably present less of a learning problem. See e.g.: L. T. ANDRÁS and E. STEPHANIDES, *An Outline of Present-Day English Structure*, Vol. 1, Introduction — Phonetics and Phonology, Tankönyvkiadó, Budapest, 4th edition, 1982., pp. 111—112.
6. For a classic example of a general type of such failures, think of Roger Kingdon’s German student of English, who kept being sent to Kensington instead of Camden Town, where he tried to say, he wanted to go. ROGER KINGDON, *The Groundwork of English Stress*. Longmans, London, 1958. xi.

## A NYELVOKTATÁS PRIORITÁSAI

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A tanulmányban a kiejtés tanításának néhány elhanyagolt, ugyanakkor a szerző szerint fontos, tehát fejlesztendő területével foglalkozik, angol—magyar viszonylatban. Ilyen a mássalhangzó-hasonulások, illetve a jelzős főnevek és más kéttagú egységek hangsúlyozásának a kérdése. A tanulók által elkövetett nyelvi hibák azt mutatják, hogy ezen a területen erősen érvényesül az interferencia. Az ilyen típusú hibák rendszerint nagyobb mértékben gátolják a verbális kommunikációt, mint az egyes beszédhangok helytelen képzése.

## ПРИОРИТЕТ ЯЗЫКОВОГО ОБУЧЕНИЯ

ЛАСЛО ПОРДАНЬ

В статье рассматриваются некоторые «забытые» вопросы обучения произношению, но, по мнению автора, являющиеся чрезвычайно важными и достойными их дальнейшего изучения. (Имеются в виду венгерский и английский языки). Таковы, например, вопросы ассимиляции согласных, произношение адъективных существительных и других двучленных единиц. Ошибки, допущенные учащимися, показывают, что в этой области резко проявляется интерференция. Ошибки такого типа, как правило, в большей степени препятствуют вербальной коммуникации, чем неправильное образование отдельных звуков речи.