

David CRYSTAL - a reply to Shuy; the dark side
of series-editing and a cri de coeur

Action reaction and inaction
in Applied Linguistics

I'm grateful to John Mountford for this opportunity to take further some of the points raised by Roger Shuy, in his review of Directions in Applied Linguistics (DAL) in the last Newsletter (N/L16). And, indeed, I'm extremely grateful to Shuy himself, for such sympathetic consideration and constructive criticism. It seems to have brought to the fore a polarity of opinion concerning the nature of Applied Linguistics (AL), which it may be fruitful to consider further. We apparently differ, in our 'negative' vs. 'positive' conceptions of the subject. In DAL, I gave an account which saw AL as primarily a problem-solving subject, where the problems are encountered and initially defined by those professionals (language teachers, speech therapists, etc.) for whom language is a means of earning a living. Shuy considers this conception too negative, and argues instead for an account of AL in which positive problems are central, i.e. 'the way to get things done with language, whether or not a negative problem intrudes itself'. He favours a 'pro-active' perspective for the subject, rather than a 're-active' one.

I am quite happy, in fact, to accept a pro-active account of the subject, as a long-term view of AL. I look forward to a day when we will have a theory of AL which will, as it were, generate all and only the linguistic problems which interfere with language learning, teaching and use. But I do not believe that Shuy's emphasis is a desirable one, at present. I do not think it can work, in practice. At least, it hasn't worked for me, at any rate. I see now a point which I did not make clear, in Chapter 1 of DAL: originally, I did hold a strongly pro-active conception of AL, along the lines Shuy suggests. But in recent years, I have found this to be less helpful

than the re-active position presented in that Chapter. From time to time, I find myself switching directions, especially in teaching formal courses to speech therapists and others, where the aim is, as Shuy suggests, to make linguistic knowledge an integral part of professional awareness. But only a minority of the world's therapists, teachers, critics, lexicographers, translators (etc.) receive any formal linguistic training --an anomaly which, I hope, the re-active approach will do something to help resolve.

Apart from in the formal teaching situation, I find the pro-active approach rarely works, in practice. Some examples. I have tried to be positive with literary critics, to introduce them to the illumination which a linguistic analysis of a text can provide, and have been greeted with a range of reactions from incomprehension to hostility. On the other hand, when I have begun by reacting to critics' own disagreements about the interpretation of a text, and used this as a motivation for doing some linguistic analysis, their reactions have been much more favourable. Or again, I used to present teacher groups with an account of various aspects of linguistics, and used this to demonstrate what I felt to be interesting and important patterns in children's work, in textbooks, teaching styles, and so on. But I have never found this to be as successful as an approach which began with the teachers' own practice, establishing their methods and attitudes, and using this as a perspective within which to evaluate what counted as a problem, for them. I have had the same experience in working with speech therapists, lexicographers and translation panels.

Why doesn't the pro-active approach work? Because the class of potential language problems which the linguist can and does expound is far greater than the class of problems which actually worry the professionals. The class of potential solutions is greater still. The professional is too easily swamped by the pro-active approach, finding himself unable to relate the linguist's observations to his own concerns. The result is the familiar criticisms of linguistics as irrelevant, abstract, technical, etc. The first two of these criticisms are certainly avoided by the re-active approach, where the relevance and concreteness of the analyses, one hopes, provide sufficient motivation for the professionals to cope with the inevitable technicality. The generalisations in which we (as ALs) are ultimately interested will come, in due course. We have to be patient. After

15 years of working in the field of linguistic pathology, I am only now at the point where I dare to make tentative generalisations (i.e. diagnoses). I am in no doubt that only a reactive approach to the work of speech therapists enabled this progress to be made so quickly (sic).

There is another reason why the pro-active approach fails: because it too rapidly involves the professional in the inadequacies and controversies of current theoretical and descriptive linguistics. Imagine trying to put Shuy's example of speech-act theory to work at classroom level. I agree that such a theory might indeed 'point the way' to a class of interesting problems, which in due course could lead to increases in the language learner's ability. There are several interesting papers around, discussing the potential of the approach. And it's not difficult to give a talk to a group of teachers which will give them an idea of the potential significance of speech-acts for their work. But after the initial general insight is accepted, all kinds of difficulties emerge, as one tries to work through the detailed implications of the approach - difficulties of conception, method and terminology, which it would be premature to expect current linguistic theory to resolve, and which take up an inordinate amount of the time that ought to be devoted to the problem-solving. During the past year, we must have had about 30 papers submitted to the Journal of Child Language which try to analyse some aspect of child language using a speech-act type of framework: no two papers ever use the same set of descriptive categories, and there are often enormous differences in criteria. So, I ask, what does a pro-active approach actually do, in such a messy situation? And what does the AL do, when, as often happens on national workshops (such as the ones organised by the DES Inspectorate), he is faced with a group of teachers who have picked up fragments of different linguists' different approaches? I know what happens in practice: one tries to develop the teachers' sense of the theoretical issues involved, so that they can see why there are differences of opinion at all. This way, one reasons, they will be in a better position to cope with the diversity of approaches in the field, and see the strengths and limitations of their own approach better. But this is glib linguistics, not applied linguistics. I am not convinced that this brings their problems any nearer to being solved.

What has to be appreciated is that this is not a problem unique to speech-act theory: many other aspects of linguistic analysis are similar, especially when it comes to settling on descriptive categories in grammar, or deciding what to do in relation to semantics, discourse, or sociolinguistics generally. Recently, I note there has been a fashion of having linguists hold hands and agree about things. This is nice, but it's the way in which linguists disagree about things that causes the real trouble, and which certainly gets in the way of pro-active approaches to AL. Of course, the same difficulties sooner or later have to be coped with by a re-active approach too; but my point is that it's going to be later, rather than sooner, as the narrower initial focus of a re-active approach reduces the opportunities for linguistic disagreement to come to the fore, and the attention of the professionals can be concentrated on what to them are the real issues. The big problems (from the linguist's point of view) are, as it were, postponed until a point when the professional has developed sufficient motivation to go into them. In the end, one hopes to build up in the professional's mind a pro-active view of the subject; but this, as I say, is a long-term view.

There's another way of looking at this, which leads to the interesting question of materials. Shuy says that we know the potential linguistics has to offer. Well, I don't. I agree with this statement, as an article of faith, of course; and I can give some examples of linguistics working well in practice. But I have no idea what the overall potential of the subject is; and the only way I know of finding out reasonably quickly is by collaborating in the production of materials. Now, a word about this last clause, for Shuy may have misunderstood what I meant by it. When I talk about collaboration, I don't mean the kind of advisory work which he refers to, and which led to his dozen wasted years. Consultancy work of this kind, I've found also, rarely gets anywhere (and usually doesn't even pay very well). No, I mean actually writing the materials myself, in collaboration with representatives of the professions for whom the materials are intended. For me, this completes the chain of reasoning: I have an opportunity to check out in practice what my view of linguistics has recommended in theory, without the distracting complication of an intermediary author. This is no news to ELT applied linguists, of course, but it is rare indeed to find other

branches of AL being approached in this way. Take all the effort that has been put into the task of analysing the way in which teachers talk to children in class, or the way in which teachers mark children's essays. It is not difficult to describe the inadequacies, to analyse why they are there, and to point out to teachers (less often, the children) the dangers of unpremeditated talking or marking. But that is where this literature stops. 'How', the teacher might reasonably ask, 'can I do things better?' 'Ah', says the AL, 'you're asking me to be prescriptive, and I can't be that. All I can do is show you a set of alternatives which ought to do the job better (if the linguistic theory is right) and suggest you try them out.' I have used this reasoning myself, often, but I view it as an abdication of my responsibility, as an AL. And the same applies to those courses and books which spend so long leading the teachers to water, but stop short of showing them how or where to drink. ALs have to grasp this nettle, it seems to me. We have to provide a principled basis for prescriptivism—a term which for too long has been a snarl-word amongst linguists, encapsulating all that they hate most in traditional grammar. How else can we reconcile intellectually such varied activities as, on the one hand, doing descriptive linguistics, and on the other hand, teaching foreigners on EFL summer schools, agreeing on usage labels for dictionaries, making decisions about language planning, or teaching our children linguistic manners? We can't avoid prescriptivism in everyday life. What we ought to do, as linguists, is to identify it (as an important cultural linguistic phenomenon) and explain its occurrence; and as applied linguists, examine the effects of different kinds of prescriptive approach on language learning, teaching and use. Materials production focuses the mind marvelously on all these issues.

My experience in this domain has to date been very limited, but it may be interesting to record that it has been the reverse of Shuy's. In writing the Skylarks language programme (Nelson 1976), and currently in doing the Edward Arnold Databank remedial readers, I have found only sympathetic publishers and enthusiastic co-authors. Both of these projects, moreover, were re-active. Databank, for instance, was started to solve the problem of the excessive demands being made on the reading abilities of 11-13-year-old children in secondary remedial classes. The books are only 24 pages long, but each one takes an extraordinary

amount of time to do, when one considers the structural, acquisitional and typographical principles which have to be borne in mind, in deciding on which words and sentences to use. I don't begrudge the time. It's rewarding work, especially when I visit remedial classes and observe the pupils working with the materials, and get teachers' reactions about the relative ease or difficulty of various parts of the books (thus evaluating the hypotheses which motivated the original selection of structures). In due course, I hope to have enough experience of this kind accumulated, to be able to make some generalisations about relative ease and difficulty in reading structures at this level. That statement, when it comes, will be a perfectly familiar paper or chapter, in the genre of applied linguistic publication. But I see the materials themselves no less as part of the business of doing applied linguistics—an essential, early, hypothesis-testing step.

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Ironically, my experience has been the same as Shuy's in a somewhat different domain of (what I suppose is a higher-order branch of) AL: editing series for publishers. I am reminded about this by Mike Stubbs' article in the last Newsletter on his new series (or non-series, almost, given his disclaimers!). He paints a very rosy picture of this kind of work—a pro-active picture, indeed, as Shuy would want—and I suppose any series starts off in this way. But my experience has been that they don't continue thus. Life steps in, and wasted months, if not years, are the norm. Thus, for example, when I was asked to set up the Penguin series, in 1968, I was given carte blanche to give broad coverage to the whole field of linguistics and applied linguistics, at two levels (Pelican and Penguin Education)—a bit like the way Brian Foss had previously done for Psychology. I spent an enormous amount of time planning and contacting, and discussing with authors or editors individual proposals. A handful of Pelicans and Penguin Education Readings and monographs came out, and then Penguin Education went to the wall, when they suffered their reverse takeover by Longman, and the whole of the Education work went up in smoke. That is why, for instance, Dennis Fry's Readings in Acoustic Phonetics, published by CUP, looks inside just like a Penguin book: it was, originally (it had reached page-proof stage when the

bomb dropped —if you'll forgive a third metaphor). That's also why there's a Book One, but no Book Two, on syntactic theory. And so on. I resigned at that point. When Penguin Education went, the interesting side of the venture, for me, disappeared.

Things haven't changed, and Newsletter readers will be interested to hear of the current controversy of this kind, which is affecting the very series in which DAL appeared. Here again, we have a publisher wishing to expand into the linguistic domain, and deciding to set up a series in order to do it: Applied Language Studies. I felt this notion needed to be interpreted systematically (pace Stubbs), and proposed a proper coverage of the field of AL. This was the whole philosophy of the series: to cover the domain of AL in the broadest sense. But several of the books which have been proposed for the series have led to difficulties —not of an academic kind (though there are plenty of those), but of a commercial kind. Naturally, the press feels it can take on only those books which it feels it can market efficiently; and as (for example) they have not previously published in the literary domain, they are unwilling to accept proposals on literary stylistics. But where does this leave a series which is attempting to cover the field of AL properly? At the moment, then, I am engaged in lengthy correspondence with the press about the purpose of the whole enterprise, and just as lengthy correspondence with several authors whose books are in limbo. It is when you get this conflict between academic merit and commercial viability that the lot of an academic middle-man becomes an extremely unhappy one. Currently, I have had it up to here, as they say, with this kind of editing problem, and I've no idea how it will resolve itself, in this case.

There is, then, the dark side of series (or journal) editing, which doesn't come across in Stubbs' article. No mention of the enormous quantities of rubbish sent in by members of the public, who see a series about language and think 'Ah, this is for my monograph on spelling reform, or my new world language'. It has to be read, and courteously replied to. No mention of the fat volumes in execrable English sent in by authors from abroad, which have got to be interpreted, before they can be read and evaluated. No mention of the lengthy correspondence one sometimes has to enter into, when having turned down a proposal, the author fights back. On the positive side, there are indeed the excitements of seeing a good

book through; of forcing you out of your academic cell to meet and discuss linguistics with interesting people; and of realising, after it's all over, that you've read a book properly --I mean really properly! But I see editing more as a duty than as a pleasure, and wish more people were willing to take it on. I also think that it's for the good of a journal or series for there to be a change in editorial direction at reasonable intervals --but that's easier said than done. After ten years, for example, I'm currently trying to find someone to take over the Journal of Child Language --so far, not with much success.

Ah well, enough said. In today's post has come another 300-pager, and Boys from the Black Stuff is being repeated tonight. Another conflict, but this time I think I know which will win!

January 1983

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