



EDITORIAL

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Dear JALDA reader

I came across this hypothetical exchange on the Net the other day: “Q: Why is linguistics important? / A: Linguistics helps us understand our world.” With my personal interest in the significance of everyday life and the real world in our education, as a response to the exchange, I immediately started contemplating the meaning of the world, and especially of ‘our world’ in the exchange. “Do we have a common world to call it ‘our world’?” “How big is this world?” “What aspects of it are we supposed to understand by means of linguistics?” “What is meant by ‘understanding the world’?” My assumption is that those behind the hypothetical exchange should be ready to answer such questions, regardless of whether the answers are agreeable or not. But what matters in this regard is that such general statements as “Linguistics helps us understand our world” should be rendered in the direction of the concretization of findings so that all scientific endeavours may turn out to be fruitful in the context of our everyday lives in the real world.

Regardless of its huge contribution to ‘knowledge’ in its aftermath, linguistics in its Saussurean sense as the scientific study of language has been subject to criticism as well by, say, sociolinguists, applied linguists, language philosophers, and by almost every scholar that has had language to be dealt with as an element in their fields. One major problem with Saussurean linguistics, according to some of its critics, has been its de-contextualization of language by introducing the dichotomy of langue and parole. There is rather a consensus now that the dichotomy has been modelled upon the Cartesian distinction between mind and body, a way of approaching the notion of ‘truth’ that turns out to be the foundation of the earlier phases of the immense modern science resulting from the significance attributed to man’s mental ability for conceptualization, mathematical thinking and analysis. The unreliable sources of knowledge including senses, feelings and emotions are dispensed with. One may call this ‘Humanism on a logical base’: the centrality of man armed with his analytic mind in the discovery of a mechanical universe. And the insignificance attributed to the body and sensual perceptions leads to an activity some would like to call ‘armchair research,’ looking for ‘truth’ while sitting in an

armchair, thinking, without moving a limb to come into contact with the material world, a shortcoming being compensated later by means of empiricism in science. One wonders how linguistics with such an attitude should help us ‘understand our world.’

A critique of the Saussurean methodology lays on it the blame that it is a realization of abstractionism in the sense that linguistics, the scientific study of language, turns into an activity detached from the real world, especially by distinguishing *la langue* (underlying system of language) from *la parole* (actual use of language) and also tackling *la langue* as a mental logical construct. From such a perspective, then, the statement “Linguistics helps us understand our world” should give way to “Linguistics helps us impose a constructed ‘reality’ upon our world!”

The concept of ‘reality’ has undergone radical challenges throughout the twentieth century scholarship, and, strangely enough, the very Saussurean type theories of language and reality have had a leading role among the challenges. More elaboration on the discussion in this editorial can be undertaken through an understanding of the double function of Saussurean structuralist linguistics itself. Whereas Saussurean linguistics is regarded as detached from the real world, it, on the other hand, makes claims, theoretically speaking, to have shed light on the nature of ‘reality.’ From a rather revolutionary perspective, it regards the relationship between language and reality as an arbitrary one, which eventually leads to the notion that ‘reality’ for the speakers of a language is rather a linguistic construct. Whorf, another structuralist linguist on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, puts the concept into very clear statements:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds — and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way — an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees (Carroll, 1956, pp.212-14).

From a rather objective perspective, Saussurean linguistics, for its latter achievement, seems to be shedding light upon a spot in the darkness of the ‘world’ against its former loss, the forgetfulness of the ‘real world’ of *parole*. Rather philosophically speaking, Saussurean linguistics, therefore, is both a ‘closure’ and an ‘openness.’ It is a ‘closure’ because it blinds the view towards the real world by excluding *la parole*, and it is an ‘openness’ because it provides an understanding of ‘reality,’ which is, of course, of mental nature. On the basis of this, in this equation, the priority of *la langue* over *la parole*, therefore, makes the attempt to ‘understand the world’ rather as an intellectual phenomenon with the least contact with the ‘real

world.’ Linguistics in this sense, then, is, to borrow Stanley Fish’s term, an ‘interpretive community’ whose members provide an interpretation of an object according to and within the framework of their assumptions, presuppositions and postulations. More recent philosophers of science find the generalization of such interpretations problematic. Rereadings of Martin Heidegger’s notion of ‘anti-Humanism’ by postmodernists, for instance, make the claim that man is not the central agent in the world to be busy imposing meaning upon it; Dasein (being there, Heidegger’s term for man) is the shepherd of the world and ‘listening’ to the world is of utmost significance for ‘being there!’ It seems that the Saussurean linguist does not listen to the world; s/he listens to either her/his own logical inner voice or the voices coming from the members of the discipline that are accepted to it for their academic achievements. For such linguists, theoretically speaking, the world out there, however, is left unattended and unheard! What may result from such a limited view of the study of language is, metaphorically speaking, the illumination of a spot while leaving the rest of the world in darkness. This is the problem whose solution has led to the emergence of such concepts as ‘interdisciplinary studies’ in academic contexts. Thus, there have been attempts in scientific circles to go beyond the ‘disciplinary’ limitations which are regarded as quite necessary in modern scientific philosophies. In the hands of ‘circles,’ elite groups, and ‘scientific communities,’ ‘our world’ may turn into a limited ‘object / phenomenon.’ And the issue is exactly this: What linguistics, any other discipline or any group might say about ‘reality,’ or whatever, should be seen as a limited notion, generalization of which is not recommended at all; any claim for ‘truth’ is a spotlight onto darkness illuminating only a spot while introducing the presence of the surrounding darkness, too. The darkness is not nil; it is possibility and limitless. Limitation lies rather with the spotlight. The questions “What is linguistics?”, “What is meant by ‘our world’?”, “What is ‘knowledge’?” should make more sense now because, from such a perspective, a concept such as ‘our world’ is both an ‘openness’ and a ‘closure.’

I had the chance recently to teach Longman Academic Writing Series 1 to a group of undergraduate students majoring in TEFL. I found the book different and very practical for the reason that it could be regarded as in line with the general tendency to understanding the ‘real world.’ Books on writing in the past, when I was a student, were mostly collections of paragraph types with grammatical and stylistic explanations. The contents of the model paragraphs were generally topics not easily understandable to language learners with non-western cultural backgrounds. The model paragraphs, therefore, did not sound interesting enough to the learners and they did not have on them the impact they should. For instance, for an anecdote, I remember the paragraph describing a horrifying thing happening on the screen in a psychological movie by Roman Polansky, which is then revealed to be the burning of the film on the projector! That was a too abstract an example to be understood by Iranian undergraduate students of TEFL. The Longman book on paragraph comprises chapters, most of which revolve around the learner/writer of paragraphs. Also, and more importantly, an activity has been added to the imitation of model paragraphs: Learners are encouraged to have their journals, make entries in them and write as much and as often as they can. They should not worry about writing perfect

sentences. The entries are not formal compositions. A journal entry is like a message to a friend (p. 43). It can be argued that in this Longman book there is a movement towards seeing the world from the learner's perspective, and what is more concrete 'reality' than the learner's? According to (Fuery and Mansfield, 1997), 'reality' today is what is 'realistic' to the observer. Whatever lies beyond the limits of the 'realistic' is not 'real' to the observer and hence does not exist in his/her world. Longman Academic Writing Series 1 indicates that good things are happening in the field of English language teaching and related areas. Why should we follow abstract teaching materials and clichés while there are infinite number of new things around us to experience!

References

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