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THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY IN THE UNIVERSITY

By

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MY subject is the Language Laboratory in the University and I have been asked to deal specifically with the materials used in conjunction with the laboratory which has been functioning at Wits since the beginning of the term.

The days are past when the ability to read Virgil and Homer in the original was the hall-mark of the educated man. In a rapidly shrinking world we are forced, whether we like it or not, to produce young adults who can speak not only French and German but Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian and Russian with a fair degree of fluency and complete intelligibility and to discuss in them not only the style of Flaubert or Lermontov but economics, politics, and engineering. Whether this urgent problem is best solved by the lavish use of recording equipment is debatable. The danger is that the scientists who are tending increasingly to control the purse-strings of education may persuade us that electronic gadgets are *per se* more valuable than teachers. I myself learned Russian, not from a language laboratory course but from records which I converted by the use of two recorders into the usual stimulus-response tapes, now regarded as such a novelty. I did not learn to speak the language fluently. French and Greek I can, and for neither did I use a tape recorder. I learnt the grammar and vocabulary from books and for practice found suitable girl friends. So let us not make a sacred cow of the language laboratory. Girl friends are much better, and failing that a good native speaker who has some training in teaching his own language. A language laboratory is, however, *one* convenient way of presenting audially a linear programme of language instruction. One very serious difficulty we have to face is the partial or complete absence of suitable courses in languages which are taught exclusively at university level in this country. The most alarming gap is in Bantu languages. There are commercially produced courses in Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho on discs, which might familiarize a complete stranger to those tongues with the sounds and basic structures; but there is no programmed course except a Xhosa one being produced by Professor Lanham for the training of missionaries in the Transkei. If it comes to that, of course, there are precious few decent textbooks. Perhaps the most crying need is for a series of elementary courses in the most important Bantu languages which will pay full attention to the tonal systems. The three-tone systems of Nguni are admittedly imperfectly understood but a start could be made with the other languages. Such courses, used in conjunction with taped recordings could be invaluable, and would-be programmers might find this a challenging and rewarding task. At the moment, I understand that *either* use is made of native informants who insist on speaking in pulpit style rather than colloquial in which neutralization of tonemic distinctions is common, *or* tones are swept under the carpet. I have actually been told by an African lecturer at a well-known English medium university—not Wits—that there is no point in teaching tones because "students can't cope with them"—as if one were to ignore the distinction between *pat* and *bad* in teaching English to Greeks, because they don't have in that language a meaningful contrast between *p* and *b*, *t* and *d*.

The University at the moment runs elementary courses making use of language laboratory methods in French, German and Russian; in addition students who are, in theory, of matriculation standard in French, but whose knowledge of the spoken language is poor are encouraged to make use of the laboratory for practice in elementary spoken French while working at the normal First Year Course. The elementary French course falls into a category of its own in so far as it is strictly speaking an audio-visual one based on the projection of special film strips accompanied by relevant prerecorded commentary; the knowledge gained in the audio-visual lessons is then reinforced in the language laboratory where intensive drills prepared by Dr. Blair herself are used. This particular course is not on the open market and is available only to teachers who have received special training in the use of it in France; the French Ministry of Education, which sponsors the

course, also insists that institutions using it should be recognized by the local French Embassy—a wise precaution in view of the large number of commercial language schools which wish to jump onto the audio-visual bandwagon quite irrespective of whether their staff are competent to handle this medium—one more indication of the half-baked respect the layman has for the machine as opposed to the teacher who runs it. For the Russian and German courses we use tapes and textbooks prepared by the Bruce Publishing Company of America, *Russkii Yazik*, and *Deutsch;* we have so far only used the first volumes of the respective series but may be running a second year course in Russian next year should student numbers warrant it.

A language consists of three interlocking systems, phonemic, grammatical and lexical.

How do our three methods teach pronunciation? There are two possible approaches; one, the more natural, is that of imitation. And it is the method to which the language laboratory is particularly adapted. Its success depends however on the flair of individual pupils for mimicry, on the extent of their auditory discrimination and on their ability for self-criticism. It must be preceded by a correct understanding on the part of all students of the articulatory mechanisms involved in the production of sounds. This means the use of technical terms such as front and back vowels, round and spread lips, dental, alveolar, velar and point of articulation and so on, but there is no short cut. Dr. Blair's explanations are oral; our German and Russian students have it all explained in their books. I wish to emphasize that this initial phase of the instruction in a foreign language is in some ways the most important. Once the wrong habits are set up they will be eliminated with the greatest difficulty.

The students must know two things: they must know what phonemes, or sound units actually occur in each word, and they must know how to pronounce these phonemes in the contexts in which they occur. This is an elementary point but a very important one. If a foreigner pronounces the English word *art* as [art] then he does not know and has possibly never been told that this particular word consists of a long back *a* and a *t*. If he pronounces it as [a : t] with an interdental stop, then he has not been told that the English /t/ is pronounced by placing the tongue against the gum or alveolus. Without this basic theoretical knowledge real progress is impossible. Students will still vary in their imitative ability but poor pronunciation must never be due to lack of essential information.

The German course passes the test well. It gives new vocabulary items for the first lessons in phonemic transcript, after which it assumes, probably correctly, that the traditional orthography of German is so closely correlated to standard pronunciation that further help of this type is unnecessary. For English or Zulu we would have to give it throughout. Its explanations of the phonetic correlates of German phonemes is also excellent. For example, in dealing with /r/ it states:

> "There are a number of variants, all equally acceptable, for this sound in German. Many speakers make it a velar spirant; i.e. the air is pressed through a narrow passage between the back of the tongue and the uvula."

Notice the admirable descriptive approach and the acceptance of dialectal variants. What a change from the older normative style of statement in which we were told that "the best type of /r/ (or the correct type) is pronounced more roughly than in English; its correct articulation can be acquired by imitation of native speakers".

Then we go on to conditional variants:

"Initially and in voiced surroundings some German speakers make this back /r/ a voiced back trill. This also happens after lax vowels."

Cross-linguistic comparisons are made at each stage. The back pronounciation is compared to the Parisian and the front trill or flap articulation to the Spanish.

Particularly valuable is the frequent contrast of German and English phonemes.

"In final position and before consonants the /r/ is reduced by most German speakers to a vocalic offglide. The so-called r-less speech in New England also has a vocalic offglide for /r/ in final position. But that is a central offglide, whereas in German it is a backward and downward glide."

The student then listens carefully on his tape to words which contain /r/ in this position, *vier*, *führ*, *Firma* etc.

Very important is that contrasts which exist in the "target" language but which do not occur in the speaker's own are carefully explained and drilled. The problem is most easily dealt with, as our course does, by the use of minimal pairs, pairs of words which differ only in respect of the contrast under discussion. The contrast for example between this offglide and the mid-central unstressed final /e/ in German is treated as follows:

> "Listen to the contrast and practice by saying both items:

Ruhr name of a river	*Rhue* 'silence'
sehr 'very'	*sehe* '(I) see'."

Very important too is the drilling of features other than those represented directly by letters in the conventional spelling. I am referring primarily to stress and intonation, where such features are distinctive. How irritating it is when we ask a question in a foreign language and we are misunderstood by the native as having made a statement. At the end of the pronunciation section we are given several short sentences in our book under which the intonation is represented by dots located on a musical clef. This is a possible way, but intonation is perhaps the one point in which the language laboratory is irreplaceable. Some people are said to be tone-deaf. Among the various capacities in which I have served during my teaching career is that of piano-master at a school in Natal (the reason the headmaster inflicted this on me being that I could not play rugby) and my best pupil was one whose last music teacher had written on his report 'When he sees a series of notes rising he doesn't know whether his hand has to go to the left or right". But this must be unusual and it is possible that intonation is basically more easily mimicked than any other aspect of speech.

Our Russian book unfortunately falls down here on several points. Just for general interest I may mention that:

(*a*) Its phonemic analysis is incorrect—it does not distinguish between phonemic and phonetic transcription. Unstressed /a/ and /o/ do not occur in standard Russian and in their place we find a sound corresponding to the vowel of English *the*. This is to be treated as an unstressed variant of *either* /a/ *or* /o/ and represented that way in the transcription. Instead of which two other symbols are used, one when the vowel occurs before stress and the other when it occurs after. The transcription is thus conceivably a phonetic one, but certainly not a phonemic one, which is what the readers of the book are told. Unless the writer really understands linguistic terminology he had better not use it, or better still not write.

(*b*) Information is given which is unnecessary. The word "Tchaikovsky", we are told, has a syllabic break between the /v/ and the /s/ because when the vowel before a three-member consonant cluster is stressed the first consonant only of the cluster belongs to the preceding syllable. This would seem to have a lot to do with the rules for splitting words between two lines when typing Russian, but nothing to do with the language itself.

Dr. Blair's approach to French pronunciation is radical. She does not allow the students to see a word in print at all until the end of the second month, and even then she tells me that this is largely to guard against the danger of students' resorting to their own erratic spellings. When she does introduce the written word it is in conventional orthography. She feels that her course is overloaded as it is and that if the students are to be equipped to read French reasonably well during their next year's course, phonetic or phonemic spellings would be an unjustified extra burden. I asked her whether she came across students whose auditory memory was so much worse than their visual one that this natural order of events seemed in fact unnatural and confusing; she admitted such cases, but argued, and I think that I would agree here, that however unconventional it may seem in relation to our traditional education system with its emphasis on reading and writing—an emphasis which is in fact even *more* marked in semi-literate societies—the shackles of habit must be broken once and for all, and the supreme importance of aural comprehension must be brought home to students at as early a stage as possible. After all, the complaint which visitors to foreign countries make after having been subjected to an expensive education in the language is not that the signs are difficult to read but that the natives speak too fast.

That is another point. It is only too common for prerecorded tapes of so-called colloquial language to be spoken at such an unnaturally slow speed that the student not only acquires a false confidence in his power of comprehension but is receiving no training whatever in the skills which he will actually have to use when he converses in the language.

A Course used by our First Year French, produced by Audio-Lingual Materials, carefully avoids this trap.

The first sentence of Unit 15 for example "Daniel was so tired that he went to sleep without having written a word" is presented on the tape at normal speed:

"Daniel était tellement fatigué qu'il s'est endormi sans avoir écrit un mot."

Our matric students come into French One and can't make head or tail of all this. They might catch the first few words if they are lucky. Then it is repeated at the same speed but with pauses between the word groups. The penny drops. This seems to me, as it does to Dr. Blair, to be the right solution. Any concessions made must be in the direction of breaking up rather than slowing down.

On the subject of pronunciation, one final warning. Some tapes give not the normal colloquial style of pronunciation but what amounts to spelling pronunciation. As mentioned earlier, neither [a] nor [o] occur unstressed in Russian; orthographic unstressed *a* and *o* are both pronounced [ə]. Yet there is a marked if inconsistent tendency in our Russian tapes for a word such as [dómə] "at home" to be pronounced [dóma] because it happens to be so spelt and for [tól'kə] "only", spelt with *o*, to be read as [tól'ko]. It is probably a very good idea when purchasing tapes to get the honest opinion of a native speaker on this sort of point. Ask him whether what he hears sounds like, or almost like a normal conversation or not. If not, don't buy.

Turning briefly to grammar, I would like merely to point out that not all the courses commercially available take cognisance of the excellent principles of programming which we have heard about today. The general plan of both our German and Russian courses is as follows:

(1) A conversation passage is read at normal speed, then reread with repetition pauses. My comment in both cases is that the sentences, and sentences are used, on very doubtful linguistic grounds, as the basis for the divisions, are too long and the pauses are too short. This latter failing can of course be remedied by further exploding the pauses.

(2) The German course then gives several questions based on the conversational passage plus their respective answers; the questions are then repeated without answers. Here particularly the answers are too long and the whole situation rather unnatural. To the question "What is a transfer ticket?" the poor student is required to answer:

> *Ein Umsteiger ist ein Fahrschein mit dem man von einer Strassenbahn in die andere oder von der Strassenbahn in den Bus umsteigen kann.*
>
> "A transfer ticket is a ticket with which one can transfer from one tram to another or from a tram to a bus."

(3) The drills in the German course are again based on long and too varied sentences; as if that were not enough the translation method is employed. An English sentence is first read—I say English but that is being charitable:

> I know to whom I want to bring something.

There follows the German equivalent:

> *Ich weiss schon, wem ich etwas mitbringen will.*

Then other English sentences are uttered for which the German translation is elicited.

(4) The Russian series does not even have this. Instead the conversation is read still a third time at dictation speed.

(5) Both series then have a reading passage. The student repeats this sentence by sentence.

Neither book can really be recommended.

Finally for treatment of vocabulary I can not do better than describe the excellent method employed by the producers of the French audio-visual lessons.

There is first of all the question of word-count. This course chooses one of 1,500 words, which is probably a good figure for an elementary course—after all five words a day through the year is not much.

What is more interesting is the method used to determine the most suitable choice of items. A pamphlet which goes with the course points out that the principle on which the vocabulary of Basic English was selected was not that of frequency but rather that of choosing a list of common words which could be used to define as large a range of everyday concepts as possible. *Sing* may be a commoner word than *song* but *song* occurs in the basic list because *sing* can be expressed by "give a song". Frequency however, the authors maintain, must be an important consideration for anyone who is going to teach comprehension of the *natural* language rather than of an artificial variety of it. But how is one going to determine the frequency of words in colloquial French? Not, by definition, by studying printed texts, but by listening to French spoken. Tape recorders were therefore used to record conversations on all sorts of topics and all levels of sophistication. These words were ranked according to frequency. There is then a snag. There are some words, mostly words referring to concrete objects, dog, teeth, bus etc. which may not occur very frequently, but which are in various ways essential. Anyone who travels and has teeth is likely to be involved in situations where the words "bus" and "teeth" are required. Without such items he would be helpless. So words of this category were added.

Another point is that the words should be up-to-date. Not only do recent words tend to increase rapidly in frequency but they make the whole learning situation more stimulating. A typical exchange in the Russian tape introduces the word *kolhoz* "collective farm" while the authors very subtly protect themselves against a possible charge of propagating communism:

Vera Petrovna: Your Uncle is a wealthy man?

Olga: Oh, no. My uncle emigrated to America only 10 years ago. In the home country he worked as a tractor operator on a *kolhoz i zil b'edna* (and lived poorly).