

RALPH B. LONG
DIRECTOR DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO

A Traditionalist View of English as a Second Language

In the universities of the continental United States active interest in English as a second language had its effective beginnings in the early 1940's. The national interest in making friends abroad was becoming very clear by that time, and help for programs in English as a second language was becoming available both from the federal government and from the foundations. Foreign students were registering in the Universities in increasing numbers, and it was becoming obvious that something had to be done about their problems with English. It was becoming clear that there was a tremendous demand for training in English abroad, and binational centers were being established — a conspicuously successful one in Mexico City — to help meet this demand. There was a clear demand, too, for advanced training in English for those who taught it abroad, as a second language. So new programs were developed, at first on a few campuses and then on many. The May, 1963, issue of the Modern Language Association, a journal *PMLA* and the August, 1963, issue of the *Linguistic Reporter* both carry accounts of the growth of the new field written by Professor Albert H. Marckwardt, now of Princeton University but until recently director of the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan. Nearly 150 colleges and universities in the States now offer courses in English as a second language, and in three of these even doctora-

tes can be taken in the field. English is being taught on a tremendous scale all over the world. Professor Marckwardt points out that in Japan alone there are approximately 70,000 teachers of English in the secondary schools, and that English is even being used as the language of instruction in such countries as Ethiopia, from the fourth grade on, and Ghana, from the first grade on. In 1961 over 221,000 students studied English abroad in programs sponsored by the United States Information Agency. Now, in Professor Marckwardt's words, "the Peace Corps Volunteers constitute the latest cadre of English teachers whom we have exported". In the *Linguistic Reporter* for April, 1963, we are told that about 1200 Peace Corps Volunteers were teaching English abroad in early 1963 and that it was expected that this number would be increased.

But English had been taught as a second language extensively and vigorously long before the universities of the Continental United States, and the federal government, began to interest themselves actively in the field. Continental European work on modern English had produced grammars that are still unrivaled in scope and unsurpassed in insight—notably the work of such Germans as Maetzner, such Dutchmen as Poutsma, and the great Danish linguist Jespersen. Almost a century ago the English translator of Maetzer's *English Grammar* spoke disparagingly of the grammars produced by native speakers of English, as not having "a higher aim than the constitution of certain arbitrary formulae for the attainment of a superficial propriety," but British work of high quality was done in English as a second language long before American work of similar quality appeared, and both Palmer's *Grammar of Spoken English* and Jones's *Outline of English Phonetics* are enduring monuments in the field of linguistic analysis. American work in English as a second language before the forties is much less impressive. The bulk of it was designed for use by immigrants, as part of the process of "Americanizing" them.

The programs in English as a second language that have developed in the States since the early forties employ, as Professor Marckwardt phrases it, "primarily a linguistically oriented

approach." It is accepted, he says, "that the minimum ingredients of a teacher—training program are courses in the structure of English, introductory linguistics, and methods and material for teaching English as a foreign language." In government and organization offices a considerable linguistic bureaucracy has become established and has used its power to support not only "a linguistically oriented approach" but also particular linguistic philosophies — or mystiques.

In Puerto Rico, English has been taught to Spanish-speaking on a considerable scale for several decades before universities on the continent showed any very noticeable interest in English as a second language. Nevertheless by the end of the forties the new programs developed on the continent were exerting tremendous influence here. The very title of the series of texts for the public schools which was completed some years later and has been of major importance in shaping the English programs of the public school since its completion, *The Fries American English Series*, advertises the indebtedness of the present Puerto Rican public—school program in English to the program in the State, most effectively championed in the forties by professor Charles C. Fries, Professor Marckwardt's predecessor as director of the extremely influential English Language Institute of the University of Michigan. Teacher—training programs on the island reflect the same influences.

It would seem to be time to ask ourselves whether a "linguistically oriented approach" is really appropriate in Puerto Rico.

We begin the teaching of English in the first grade in Puerto Rico. Since we are interested in mastery of the spoken language as well as of the written, it is unquestionably right to begin work with English early. Children can master spoken language rapidly and well—humiliatingly better than their parents, as many of us learn by experience, and much better than self-conscious adolescents. In his *English Sentences* (1962) professor Paul Roberts, with several years of teaching abroad behind him, has commented on the fact that in parts of the Middle East six — and seven—year—old children of quite ordinary intelligence already speak as many as four languages—often languages

as unlike in structure as Arabic, Turkish, Greek, and French. In his *Speech and Brain Mechanisms* (1959) Dr. Wilder Penfield, Head of the Department of Neurology and Neurosurgery of McGill University, with long experience very different in kind from that of professor Roberts, has written that beginning second-language study as late as adolescence is comparable to beginning married life at the age of forty. Children make the best students of spoken language, and it seems entirely clear that all they need is good models and strong interest. It is not easy to provide good models in the lower grades of the public school of Puerto Rico. As for interest, all too often our materials fall far short of having the quality of absorbing interest that the best children's books, for example, have. It seems probable that television can bring us help in this situation. Certainly television programs can awaken very strong interest.

If good models and strong interest are what is needed when second languages are to be taught to children, it is hard to see that in Puerto Rico we should have an approach that is primarily "linguistically oriented." It is true that if the basic phonological and grammatical patterns of English are not learned by Puerto Rican children in the lower grades, and are therefore taught in adolescence and even later, procedures that involve linguistic analysis may seem to become of central importance. When we are no longer children, most of us like to see accounts for the phonology and the grammar of any languages we study. We have lost the child's ability to imitate, we have gained an interest in analysis. And it is a sad fact that in Puerto Rico much of our teaching of English at even the second-year university level is still concerned with matters of pronunciation and construction that should have been mastered in the lower grades. Rightly, of course, what should be central in the teaching of a second language above the most elementary levels in exactly what should be central in teaching of the home language: reading and writing. Linguistic analysis should be central only for those who wish to specialize in it, at advanced levels.

I must add that my own conviction is that training in English above the lower grades should include a certain amount of analy-

sis of the vocabulary, the grammar, and (least important) the phonology, for *all* students. And certainly teachers and prospective teachers of the language should have some understanding of its structure. Just as we can expect better houses to be constructed by those who have studied the construction of houses, so we can expect better sentences to be constructed by those who have studied the construction of sentences. I would say that mastery of even a very poor grammatical system is preferable to mastery of none at all.

The question of what kind of English grammar to teach had a great deal of attention in the fifties. Professor Freiss' *Structure of English* (1952), Professor Trager and Smith's *Outline of English Structure* (1951), and Professor Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* (1957) represent three very different kinds of analysis—the first “function word” Structuralist, the second phonemically based (“High Church”) Structuralist, the third Generativist (or Transformationalist). In the fifties students of English language who wanted to be avant-garde had a busy time: as professors Bloomfield and Newmark put it in their *Linguistic Introduction to the History of English* (1964) within the decade “the linguistic description of English was overthrown three times.” Certainly the school grammar was effectively demolished, and it seems to be equally clear that only the Generativists, among the groups that arose in the fifties, now cut a respectable figure in the national meetings and in the journals concerned with linguistic analysis. My own feeling is that a Traditionalist grammar which derives not from the school grammar commonly taught in the States but from the work of the standard European grammarians of English — and especially from that of Poutsma, Jespersen, and Palmer — will prove more nearly satisfactory than any of the varieties. Actually Traditional grammar and Generative grammar are not in fundamental conflict, as Traditional grammar and Structuralist grammar were. Traditionalist have always employed transformational techniques to a considerable extent: for example, in analyzing *what are you looking for?* In terms of an underlying declarative *you are looking for x*. The Generativists are doing first rate work that can be assimilated into

the tradition with very little trouble. It remains true that it is Traditional grammars, not Generative (or Structuralist) grammars, that teachers must turn to if they want to find fairly complete accounts of the uses of, say, the perfect tenses, the *much* nouns (such as *fun*, *furniture*, *news*, and *milk*), the *to* that precedes many infinitives, or the definitive article *the*. And the characteristic Traditional Terminology and format are relatively simple, relatively familiar, and relatively defensible.

The question of what kind of phonological analysis, and symbolization, to employ also received a great deal of attention in the fifties. Controversy centered around the vowel sounds. In the analysis generally followed in Puerto Rico, which we can conveniently refer to as the Kenyon analysis in recognition of the work of the late Professor John S. Kenyon, the “long” vowel sounds of, say, *meet*, *mate*, *moat*, and *moot* are treated as single phonemes, not only before voiceless consonants but, at the other extreme, finally as in *see*, *say*, *sew*, and *sue*. In the powerfully supported analysis of Professors Trager and Smith these sounds are treated as in effect diphthongal. In the Trager—Smith analysis what occurs between /m/ and /t/ in *meet* is treated as phonemically the same as what occurs between /m/ and /t/ in *mitt* except for the presence of a glide: *meet* is written as /miyt/ and *mitt* as /mit/. The Trager—Smith analysis has a certain “elegance”. But there are no dictionaries that employ it, whereas the Kenyon analysis is employed by the Kenyon and Knott *Pronouncing Dictionary of American English* (1944, 1953), the Williams *Spanish and English Dictionary* (rev. ed., 1962), and the very inexpensive *University of Chicago Spanish-English Dictionary* (1948), (1963). And the Kenyon analysis has the merit of recognizing a distinct vocalic subsystem employed in unstressed syllables, by using symbols for the unstressed vowel sounds of *sofas*, *trophies*, and *suffers* that are quite distinct from those use for the stress vowel sound of *fuzz*, *fees*, and *furs*. The distinction between stress of whatever grade, and absence of stress is basic in modern spoken English and deserves maximum visual representation in phonemic transcription, I would say. But I must add that from a purely pedagogical point of view I doubt

very much that either the Kenyon symbolization or that of Trager and Smith is as practical, except at specialized advanced levels, as that employed in improved form in the Webster's *Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (1963) which stays close to the fundamental spelling system of modern English and yet uses only one symbolization for every phoneme. It is hard for those of us who have worked with the Kenyon symbolization, or the Trager—Smith symbolization, to accept transcription of *meet* as /met/ while *mitt* is transcribed as /mit/; but we should remember that our pedagogical objective is to distinguish the medial sounds of *meet* and *mitt*, not to relate them, and we do have to deal with a spelling system in which the vocalic segment of *meet* and *mete*, and *meat*) is usually related to the letter *e*, not (as in exotic *ski*) to the letter *i*.

As for the courses in “introductory linguistic” which Professor Marckwardt considers among the “minimum ingredients of a teacher - training program” in English as a second language, there is reason to maintain a considerable degree of skepticism at this point. I myself would say that here in Puerto Rico a solid course in Spanish grammar would be likely to have much greater value for teachers of English. So would a good course in Latin, I would say. General linguistic theory is much less useful in the classroom than specific knowledge of the language the teacher is dealing with. And the Structuralist mystique with available texts in introductory linguistic propound is now dated. It is true that in the recent revision of his *Introduction to Descriptive Linguistics* (1961) Professor H. A. Gleason has included a certain amount of Generativist theory along with Structuralist theory, but a linguistic philosophy deriving from such Europeans as Humboldt is obviously dominant among active workers in linguistic analysis now, and Bloomfield will have to be demoted to the ranks of the minor prophets whether the Americanists like it or not.

Training in materials and methods is very important, of course, for those who are to teach English as a second language in the schools. But the Structuralist mystique which has been dominant in American work in English as a second language for two decades now has been responsible for the teaching of a great

deal of pernicious nonsense in such courses in the States and in the binational centers abroad. Professor Edwin Cornelius's *Language Teaching* (1953) gives the almost—official Structuralist ideology its most exuberant expression and in 1963 is still being recommended by the English Teaching Division of the United States Information Agency as “good for teacher training and presentation to teachers of English” in the binational centers and presumably in the Peace Corps. A list of twenty-two “superstitions” about language learning Professor Cornelius gives (pp. 54-56) is too long for full quotation here, but I cannot resist quoting about a third of it:

2. Latin is helpful in learning modern languages.
3. The meaning of words is important in the learning process.
4. In order to learn to speak a language, a student should master about five thousand words in the language.
5. Grammar study and rules are important in learning a language.
9. Children learn languages more quickly than adults.
12. Some languages are richer than others.
19. Interest in learning a language is essential in the learning process.
21. Some people don't even speak their own language very well.

These are superstitions! One can only say that in this field the “superstitions” ridiculed by Structuralist zealots in the fifties are likely to prove closer to the truth than the pseudoscientific dogmas of the Structuralists. The characteristic Structuralist opposition to work on vocabulary and grammar, and to translation, has thinned the intellectual content of Structuralist programs notably. (The antigrammar of unexplained pattern practice is of course not grammar.) The curious romantic primitivism that causes so many Structuralist to insist that unwritten language of primitive tribesmen are instruments of expression of as high quality as the languages in which science and technology have long been dealt with and great literatures have been developed — this, I suppose, is not downright harmful, but it is certainly silly.

What Professor L. M. Myers, in an article entitled "Linguistics—but Not Quite So Fast" (*College, English*, 1961), calls the doctrine of "the infallibility of the native speaker" is pretty silly too. As Professor Myers says the native speaker often knows quite well that he uses his language badly. Professor Myers goes on to defend attention to vocabulary and grammar, and goes so far as to say that in the United States "a man can gain general respect for his language with any set of noises he happens to have, as long as his syntax and vocabulary are satisfactory" and that "there is a rather widespread superstition that educated foreigners, in spite of their accents, are the only people who really speak perfect English".

Let us face it: in English as a second language it is high time to break away from preoccupation with doctrine and to approach our job in a purely pragmatic spirit.