

PROF. CASTAÑOS' REMARKS

I have had the opportunity to read Peter Hubbard's reply to "Más Que Comunicación." I wish to thank him for his interest in my paper. I also wish to make some remarks.

Peter Hubbard says I went "on to say that we should therefore abandon the communicative approach to teaching languages." I did not. I could not have, because I do not know what the communicative approach is.

As I argue in the paper, the central body of the approach has been changing confusingly. And precisely my concern is with what made that possible: a view of the nature of language and a style of argumentation.

I am opposed to the view that language is simply constituted by its functions. I think that, in a more complex fashion, language is also a constituting factor of its functions. Therefore, an explanation of language as a mere reflection of its functions is necessarily misleading, which for example could be shown through a study of computer terminology. 'Input' and 'goto' would have not been possible if 'in', 'put', 'go' and 'to' did not exist beforehand. They would not have been possible either if the rules for word-formation in English were those of another language, say Swahili, nor if the conventions for breaking those rules were different from those English-speaking communities follow. In those hypothetical cases, the functions of 'input' and 'goto' would have been performed by other devices and in different ways.

The consequence for language-teaching "philosophy" is not contrary to the principle that giving students practice in communicating may teach them the form -- "eventually," Hubbard would add. It is simply that students will not learn if they are not provided with sufficient instances of the "form of language," or information about it. No dogmas should be derived from this as to

the way such instances or information ought to be provided. As Hubbard would agree, there are many other issues to be considered.

I am also opposed to the abuse of the meaning variation resources of language. These resources are invaluable in the development of scientific theories; we could not create new concepts without them. But they can be dangerous when somebody wants to consider the same concept throughout a discussion, or when the same concept is supposed to give coherence to the history of a movement.

To give an example, Hubbard adduces that people choose to demonstrate which group they wish to identify with, and takes this as evidence that language is communication. In this way he presents two assumptions of his own mind as if they were general assumptions: 1) that communication essentially implies choice, and 2) that identification is part of communication. What he is really doing is introducing a meaning of communication which has not been present in most recent language teaching theory discussions, as if it had been.

It is convenient to make a parenthetical comment here. Hubbard combines the two assumptions to derive an apparently logical conclusion. But if, for the sake of the argument, we accept the assumptions for a moment, we will see that they do not resist further evidence and lead to contradiction. For very often people demonstrate which groups they identify with without wanting to do so, through the way they communicate; and more often, they simply demonstrate which groups they belong to, even if they wish to do otherwise.

Let us now go back to the point I was making. Assumption 1, that communication implies choice, is an interesting view. It has been explored by very respectable linguists; John Lyons was among them at some point. It was also exploited by language teaching theorists in the transition period from the situational approach to the communicative movement, to use Hubbard's terminology.

In those years a phrase from the title of an article by Wilga

Rivers became a slogan for what we wanted students to do: be able to talk off the tops of their heads. But around the same time, another view of communication was popularized by Christina Bratt Paulston.

This other view came from information theory, and it was that communication reduces uncertainty. In accordance with it, Bratt Paulston proposed a categorization of communicative drills as those in which students contributed new information, as opposed to other kinds of drills where students' utterances were completely predictable.

Instead of looking at communication from the point of view of the speaker, as Rivers did, Bratt Paulston looked at it from the point of view of the hearer. The speaker's perspective was taken again, but from another angle, by Henry Widdowson, when the communicative movement can be properly said to have started.

Widdowson introduced concepts taken from speech-act philosophy and developed them for language teaching. For him, practice of isolated forms was artificial. Real, communicative activities had to involve speakers' intentions to invite, order, bet, apologize, and so on.

In the late seventies, however, Widdowson's main focus of attention moved from intentionality to clarity of exposition. He showed that two texts can convey the same propositions, but one may communicate them more effectively than the other. And he revealed some of the discourse procedures that account for the difference.

Choice, informativeness, speech-act intent, clarity -- all of these have been postulated as defining characteristics of communication. And not only these, but also others, such as personal, existential commitment. My preoccupation is, then, with arguments that provide evidence for an idea involving an earlier meaning when the discussion is about a later one, or vice-versa, - arguments that refer to new meanings when offering data about old ones.

Assumption 2 is about matters which have not been discussed very much in language teaching theory, though they have been exploited in materials design. Therefore, my remarks about them will be more general and brief. The problem is that for some people identification is part of communication; Peter Hubbard is among them. But for others, identification is a condition for communication to be possible; Bronislaw Malinowski is among them. And there are many which belong neither to one group nor the other. I, for example, would try to avoid prejudice by constructing my theory in such a way that identification and communication are logically independent, and then finding out empirically how they are related in reality. Clearly, the problems with assumption 2 are very similar to those with assumption 1.

Apart from the main thread of my paper, and to end these remarks, I wish to briefly note a few points:

1. I would in very general terms agree with Hubbard's opening interpretation of my position that "language is not solely the product of a process of evolution." However, I think that his next phrase, "be this Lamarckian or Darwinian," which he probably intended to be redundant, and thus helpful for the reader, is indeed misleading. The distinction between environment-directed evolution and natural selection is crucial in biology, and so it is in my metaphorical use.
2. I am not Whorfian, though I admire Whorf's human and scientific attributes. In fact, I have elsewhere presented a philosophical discussion entitled "Proposiciones fuera de su marco conceptual," which shows that we do not have to agree, and we often do not agree, with the frameworks that allow us to see the world as we see it.
3. That Halliday does not write clearly is a not very well-founded cliché. That he is not lucid is a most surprising proposition.
4. My article has not made it seem that language teaching methodology is naive. That is a very peculiar reading of Hubbard's.

5. I share Peter Hubbard's concern for the relationship between applied linguistics and language teaching. I also share some of his views on the matter, but I do not think they bear on the issues I have remarked upon here. This does not mean I avoid the challenge I promise to consider the question soon, in another writing.