



**ON ENGLISH GRAMMAR AND OTHER RELATED
TOPICS: A CONVERSATION WITH
PROF. PAUL CHRISTOFFERSEN.**

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– You come from a country which has made substantial contributions in the field of language studies in general, and more specifically, in the case of the English language. I am of course referring to the giant figure of Otto Jespersen. We'll talk about this later because at this stage I'd like to ask you this question: why is it that the most thorough descriptions of English so far have been made by both you Danes and by Dutch people (Kruisinga, Poutsma, Visser...)? Is it purely accidental, do you think, or is it, shall we say, historical nostalgia –the fact that these countries were part of the mother land of the Angles and the Jutes– that makes you excel in the study of the English language?

– That is an interesting question. There is probably, as you suggest, an element of «historical nostalgia» in Scandinavian attitudes to English, linked with the fact that the Scandinavian languages are close to English both in vocabulary and grammatical structure.

– Could we go back in time and talk about your early years as a student? When did you begin to learn English?

– I started learning English at the age of ten, German one year later but French not for another three years. In the meantime I had also started Latin. At Copenhagen University, where I began as a student in 1930, my first degree was in English and French. My first Ph.D. was also from that university. I got my second one in Cambridge where I spent some years before moving on to London.

- After two years as a research assistant at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London you became Professor of English at the University of Copenhagen in 1946. Then you begin what one might call a teaching pilgrimage which takes you to different parts of the world (universities of Ibadan, Oslo, Ulster, Qatar...). Now, I suppose this must be a very enriching experience that not everybody would be willing to go through, even if they had the chance to do so. Do you think that mobility, professionally speaking, is an asset that should be encouraged?

- I do feel that working in different countries (as distinct from just visiting them as a tourist) is humanly enriching, and I regard languages as windows opening on new and exciting worlds - because a language is a great deal more than a code of communication: it is a way of life.

For a scholar, mobility is also greatly to be encouraged because it prevents him from adopting too parochial an attitude to his work. In Britain, for instance, and in America too, it is quite common for a student to do postgraduate work in a different university from that where he got his first degree, which seems to me to be salutary.

My personal view is that all teachers, and not least those at university level, should take advantage of any opportunity they may have of spending some time at a foreign university, either on an exchange or a contractual basis.

- Let's now turn our attention to other matters. Your study *The Articles in English* was published in 1939, long before spectacular developments in linguistics took place. It seems to me, however, that what you had to say about the relation between language and psychology and about the task of the linguist who «should examine both the outer form of the language and the mental basis of this form» is anticipatory of much of what is being done today. What do you think?

- In Copenhagen in the 1930s there was a lot of talk about new and revolutionary ideas in linguistics. The very word «linguistics» was new and was given a special meaning distinct from «philology». One of the champions of the new ideas was Hjelmslev who in fact was one of the examiners for my Copenhagen doctorate.

But it is true, of course, that we in Europe have never been «antimentalistic». Behaviourism has never been popular here. Language for the «traditionalist» as well as for the «transformationalist» of today is a mental phenomenon; only by knowing more about how the human mind works shall we be better able to account for many linguistic phenomena.

- In this book you also deal with the functions of the article in different languages which, obviously, is an exercise in «contrastive linguistics» or rather «multilateral stylistics», although these terms were not used at the time. Now, a great fuss, as you know, was made in the late fifties over this contrastive analysis in the teaching of a foreign language, but would you

agree that for a teacher who knows two or more languages the tendency to contrast them is almost inevitable?

– I agree. It was this idea that was developed into a teaching method in the 1940s and 1950s by people like Charles C. Fries and Robert Lado. But I suspect that good language teachers have always been aware that some of the points that give greatest difficulty to a learner are those where there are marked differences in structure between his own language and the one he is trying to learn. American structuralists systematized this approach and were able to predict at least some of the difficulties and to suggest remedial measures. This is undoubtedly an advance, perhaps even a great advance, but it is not as revolutionary as it has been claimed to be.

Obviously, «contrastive analysis» can be a great help to the language *teacher*. At the same time, since a language is, up to a point, a way of life, there is a great deal to be said for plunging the *learner* into a new world and making him temporarily forget that there is any other world. But no teaching method has a monopoly of wisdom.

– **We come now to your second major publication: *A Modern English Grammar, Vol. VI*, written in collaboration with Jespersen and it is fitting to talk here in passing about this man whom you must have known very well. When and how did you get to know him?**

– Jespersen had retired from Copenhagen University before I corresponded with him a good deal and also visited him at his home in Elsinore. Now, as you may know, a considerable part of Jespersen's impressive output was produced after his retirement in 1925, and, in addition, towards the end of his life a grant from the Carlsberg Foundation enabled him to enrol assistants for the last two volumes of his *Grammar*. I was one of those fortunate people that he enrolled.

– **What was the nature of your participation in this project? I would imagine that he had laid down some guidelines which you had to follow more or less closely.**

– Yes. As a matter of fact, he had planned everything in advance so that there was not much room for innovation, which is only reasonable when you come to think of it.

The method of procedure was that each of us was given an outline of a particular chapter or sequence of chapters, as well as all the quotations relating to it and was asked to write it as he thought Jespersen would have done, selecting such quotations as Jespersen would have included.

– **That must have been a hard task for you, having always to imagine what Jespersen would do and what he would not do...**

– Yes, it was by no means an easy task and not always performed to his satisfaction either. For instance, I remember he once wrote to me: «I am at present revising your chapters on Compounds. I am going to rewrite the whole of your Introductory remarks». But at least he continued: «Most of

the rest I shall leave practically unchanged». What finally emerged as Volume VI was not only approved by Jespersen, but was critically revised and in part rewritten by him.

– **We could, I am sure, spend hours talking about Jespersen’s work but what bearing would you say it has upon contemporary linguistics?**

– It is strange to find him quoted, as he so often is nowadays, as an example of «traditional» grammar. Jespersen was very much of an iconoclast in his time, a rebel against the strait-jacket of Latin-based grammar. But Jespersen’s work usually had a practical orientation; he was an empiricist, and he would have been out of sympathy with much modern linguistic thinking. Not least, he would have disliked modern linguistic jargon, his own motto being: what’s worth saying is worth saying simply.

On the other hand, a great deal of more practically slanted modern research would have excited Jespersen: neurolinguistic investigation into brain structure, the position of the speech centres, lateralization, and so on. Also some psycho and sociolinguistic work; language in its relation to the individual and to the community was a strong interest of Jespersen’s.

In modern language teaching he would have been disappointed at the relatively insignificant role that phonetics seems to play nowadays, perhaps under American influence. He would have approved of the Communicative Approach (which after all is just a variation on the Direct Method), but I suspect that he would have been somewhat critical of ESP¹ courses.

For some time to come people will no doubt continue to read his book on *Language* with profit, but the work of his that will remain in use longest is the *Modern English Grammar*, which is largely unaffected by changes in linguistic theory.

– **Coming back to your own work, you are also the author of a well-known manual, *An English Phonetics Course*, published in 1956. How do you feel about the problem of exhibiting pronunciation in coursebooks and dictionaries, especially as regards certain aspects like assimilation or intonation?**

– One can’t learn pronunciation from a book alone, although phonetic information in book form can be a great help. But nowadays, with the help of modern technology, exposure to the genuine article is so easy to arrange.

– **What role is Generative Phonology to play in the teaching of foreign languages and to what extent, if at all, will it displace traditional practices (Jones, MacCarthy, Gimson, etc.)?**

– Like Chomsky himself I am sceptical about the usefulness in the teaching of languages of developments in the field of theoretical linguistics. It does not necessarily follow that what we know –or what we think we know, or what some people think they know– about the organization of language will be helpful or indeed relevant in constructing a teaching

programme for second language learners. We need to know far more than we do about how competence in a language is acquired as distinct from how it works once it has been acquired. Chomsky's proposal in an interview a few years ago was in effect (if I may simplify his words a little): expose the learner to the language as much as possible and leave his inborn language learning ability to do the rest. This seems sensible advice; at least up to a point.

However, if you follow Chomsky's advice, the learner may indeed become very fluent but he will almost certainly have a foreign accent. As far as I can see, Chomsky regards a foreign accent as normal and natural and perhaps even inevitable. He is certainly critical of pronunciation drill in language teaching. This appears to me to be a defeatist attitude and a retrograde step.

The kind of work on pronunciation that was initiated by Henry Sweet with his *Handbook of Phonetics* (1877) and continued by Daniel Jones and A.C. Gimson and others, and was supported by phonemic theory as developed by the Prague School and Bloomfieldian structuralists –this kind of work can lead to great improvement in pronunciation. The individual's inborn ability to acquire a perfect accent without any help seems to deteriorate in the second decade of life, but with proper instruction a foreign accent can not only be greatly reduced: it can be completely avoided or eliminated.

Ultimately, of course, this is a question of aims and of how much effort one is prepared to put into the learning process.

– **While on the subject of pronunciation, how do you view the issue of Spelling Reform?**

– A major reform of English spelling would present insuperable difficulties. On what regional pronunciation should it be based, and what would one do about earlier writings in traditional spelling? Would these all be transliterated at enormous cost, and who would bear that cost, or would we all have to learn to read both traditional and reformed orthography? I see no hope for that kind of radical reform: it is a lost cause and any efforts spent on it are wasted.

In fact, it is by no means certain that a radical reform even if it were feasible, would be a gain. A reformed spelling would destroy the unity that largely exists in the western world today in the sphere of technical vocabulary: *telephone*, *radio*, etc. All western languages spell R-A-D-I-O, but think of what a reformed English spelling would make of this word. And we do on the whole communicate more by writing than by speech.

The existing English spelling is of course not, and cannot easily be made, phonemic. In some respects it is morphemic, as in the case of the two grammatical endings *-s* and *-ed* and words with strong and weak forms like *for* and *have*. This is probably an advantage, because even with an

alphabetic system of writing one's reading is never completely alphabetic, except when one is faced with a new or unknown word: normally it is morphemic and semi-ideographic. We recognize words by their general shape and outline rather than by individual letters.

In any case English spelling is not as irregular as it is sometimes made out to be. Regularities like *hoping/hopping* and *later/latter* should be stressed in EFL teaching, and generative phonology can of course be brought in to explain *telephone, telephony, telephonic*, etc.

This is not to say that there are no points, minor points on the whole, where improvements might fairly easily be introduced. *Read* and *red* cover two pronunciations, but not by representing one each; and irregularities like *bone* and *gone* and *done* could and should be weeded out.

– **The year 1969 saw the publication of *An Advanced English Grammar* which you wrote in collaboration with A. Sandved. This book proved to be a tremendous success as shown by the fact that, in spite of the existence of other important and popular grammars (those by Zandvoort, Close, Quirk *et al.*, Leech & Svartvik, to name but a few among the Europeans), in spite of them, yours is being reprinted almost once every year, something which must be very pleasing to you. Why this success? Where do you think the secret lies and, secondly, what reasons would you give a potential buyer for choosing your manual?**

– I'm afraid I don't know. Naturally I'm pleased that this book has been so well received but I can't explain why it sells so well. Having said this, let me add that Sandved and I set out to present a fairly consistent analysis along lines which we explained at the beginning of the book. We hoped to encourage students to think for themselves about these matters. And since we thought our system of analysis would stand out more clearly if it was not overburdened with details, we decided to relegate some of the details to Part II.

– **In most of your publications you seem to be concerned mainly with English as a language to be learned by non-natives...**

– Second-language learning and what it involves is a profound interest of mine. I was always interested in languages and liked playing with them like the children in Du Maurier's *Peter Ibbetson*, and this interest gradually grew in depth until I came to realize that, in a manner of speaking, a language is a way of life.

– **A very interesting book for those engaged in teaching second or foreign languages is your *Second-language Learning*, published by Penguin in 1973 and now out of print! How will the teaching of modern languages evolve in the 1980s?**

– Not being a prophet I can't really answer this question, but if I am to say anything at all about the future, I must first be allowed a brief backward glance. In my early youth, in Denmark between the two wars,

language teaching methods did not constitute a problem – or rather, it was a problem that seemed to have been solved, not least by Jespersen's pioneering work. There was general agreement that modern languages should be taught as living languages, by some form of the Direct Method, but without completely excluding the mother tongue and the use of grammar drill. A good deal of attention was paid to pronunciation exercises and phonetic transcription. At the same time, in academic circles, new developments in theoretical linguistics attracted attention; the great names in those days were Saussure and Troubetzkoy, and in Copenhagen Hjelmslev and Brøndal were active. But it did not occur to anybody to consider whether the new linguistic insights might be utilized in language teaching. The two kinds of activity operated on different planes; there appeared to be no obvious meeting ground, but then nobody was looking for a meeting ground, because language teaching, as I said, seemed to be a problem that had been solved.

In my experience, therefore, discussion of TEFL ² problems was something that began in America after the Second World War – undoubtedly because language teaching in America was badly in need of reform, more so than anywhere else in the western world. The new, or supposedly new, ideas that were propounded were mostly those of the European reformers of the 1880s, Henry Sweet and Paul Passy and Jespersen and others, ideas which Leonard Bloomfield had learnt about during a year that he spent in Europe from 1913 to 1914. Unfortunately, the reformist efforts in America were given theoretical underpinning by being linked, rather too rigidly, to American structuralism and the contrastive analysis that resulted from it. A very mechanistic approach to language teaching evolved, divorced from the use of language in practical communication, which had been a cornerstone of the Direct Method. The term Direct Method went out of use and in fact came to be sneered at, and it is only in the last ten years that the term has again become respectable in America.

With the development of TG grammar a number of people immediately started reforming their language teaching programmes to bring them into line with the latest theory without ever raising the question of whether this theory could claim to have any direct bearing on second language acquisition. This is something that worries me: the TEFL world is bedevilled by passing fads and fashions. It is important, obviously, that EFL teachers should continue to look for ways of improving their work, but it is equally important that they should realize that human nature being what it is and languages being what they are (namely, a way of life rather than a code of communication), «nothing will ever make the learning of languages easy». The words I am quoting are Henry Sweet's, uttered in 1899 but equally true today. There will never be a breakthrough,

a revolutionary improvement in the formal teaching of languages and it is a waste of time to keep looking for it.

On the other hand, something in the nature of a revolution might happen if one day it came to be fully accepted that knowledge of a language is something very different from knowledge of history or physics or mathematics, and if consequently, languages were lifted right out of the ordinary school curriculum and taught in a different way. Ultimately (as Chomsky has said) it is exposure to the language to be learnt that matters. If the exposure could be increased, the teacher's role could be reduced. Now modern technology has increased the possibility of exposure to foreign languages enormously, not only by making travel easier and faster, but by making it possible through television and videotapes to bring the foreign environment, the foreign language situation, right into the classroom *or the home*. I foresee a time –it may not be so very distant– when the small language communities of the western world may find their existence threatened. A frequent complaint in Welsh-speaking Wales is that English television –ordinary entertainment television– is killing the Welsh language. Children of Welsh-speaking parents learn English by watching television, and decide they would rather speak English than Welsh. The same kind of development might happen elsewhere.

– I am sure that many teachers will feel greatly relieved by the ideas you have just expressed. Could you perhaps say a few final words about their preparation and training? Where should it take place? Can the training of EFL teachers claim university status in its own right and what should the content of a training scheme be?

– Although many university courses are rightly intended as a preparation for a particular profession, I consider that a university course should first of all aim at developing a somewhat philosophical and theoretical approach to its subject and should attempt to see the kind of work involved in some perspective. Among other things it should be detached and critical in its view of passing fads and fashions.

For this reason, if one wants EFL teachers to be drilled mainly in the application of a particular method or technique, I don't think a university is the right institution to provide that kind of training. Probably a university course followed by intensive vocational training somewhere else would be the best preparation for a TEFL career.

On the other hand, I think the training of EFL teachers can claim university status if it is given sufficient intellectual content and requirements as to background knowledge: systems of linguistic analysis, psychological and sociological aspects of language, approaches to language training, etc., including a historical survey, because many of our ideas go back a long way – hardly surprising, seeing that languages have been taught for thousands of years, and it is salutary to realize that we cannot claim a

monopoly of wisdom nowadays. And of course an absolute requirement must be a good practical knowledge of modern English and of the life and institutions of at least one English-speaking country.

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- ¹ English for Special Purposes
- ² Teaching English as a Foreign Language