Reflections on Language and Language Learning

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In honour of Arthur van Essen

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Arthur van Essen

Contents

Language and language learning: An introduction

On 1 December 2000, Arthur van Essen retired as Professor of Applied Linguistics and the Methodology of Teaching the Humanities at the University of Groningen. Bearing in mind what the outstanding linguist William R. Lee once suggested in a letter, namely, that 'it is time to see him honoured in a traditional way', we considered it expedient to approach several eminent linguists in the Netherlands and abroad with whom over the years Arthur van Essen had collaborated, in order to solicit their contribution to a volume in his honour. Thanks to van Essen's standing in the field of language study, applied and otherwise, notably English Language Teaching — but also, we suspect, because of the cordial nature of these professional relationships — , we were able to procure, very much to our satisfaction, the participation of several distinguished language scholars.

What is more, since the contributors have gone beyond the call of duty in providing us with highly original essays, conveying and discussing the most recent trends and insights in their respective fields of competence, we presume that the present volume exceeds the bounds of the traditional academic 'Festschrift'. In effect, while interdisciplinary in scope, *Reflections on Language and Language Learning* encompasses theoretical advances in (educational) linguistic thinking — for example, the essays written by Byram, Jordens, Koster, and van Lier — as well as a sample of the latest methodological developments in the areas of language learning and teaching — the contributions by Candlin, Goethals, Meara and Rodríguez Sánchez, and Mitchell and Brumfit being obvious cases in point.

The editors wish to express their gratitude to Alja Mensink and Ineke Riem for editorial assistance, and to Nanne Streekstra for producing Arthur van Essen's photo portrait. The publication of this book was facilitated by a generous grant from CLCG, the Centre for Language and Cognition of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Groningen, which is gratefully acknowledged.

Overview

The volume is inaugurated by a biographical sketch and professional estimation from the pen of Arthur van Essen's esteemed colleague and long-standing friend Bill Lee. We are very grateful to Monica Lee for allowing us to include her now deceased father's tribute in this tome.

The book begins with four contributions devoted to historical perspectives on language and language learning. The first is a probing essay by Jan Koster entitled *Linguistics, historicism and the humanities*. Koster contends that the various philosophical currents in post-war Europe, though varying in many respects, share what he calls the 'received view of the humanities', which emerged in the early-nineteenth century as the combined result of British empiricism and German Romantic thought. According to the received view of the humanities, cultural phenomena, language included, are not seen as the expression of universal principles but as historically determined events. This view is in direct opposition to the kind of rationalism underlying modern linguistics and cognitive science as inspired by Chomsky, Fodor, and others.

The next essay, *The man who knew too much* by Jan Noordegraaf, describes the career of the turn of the century Dutch polyglot J. M. Hoogvliet. After sketching his historical background, Noordegraaf reviews Hoogvliet's major didactic works on foreign-language teaching, and reflects on the issue of why his innovative teaching methods were scarcely put to practice.

Bondi Sciarone's *Applied linguistics, old and new* surveys the general developments in the field of applied linguistics, particularly focussing on significant aspects such as the assessment of the quality of course materials, the selection of vocabulary, and the characteristics of learning behaviour. In that connection, Sciarone argues that modern applied linguistics should improve on methods developed in the past, rather than discard them, and goes on to illustrate how the technical facilities that have recently become available can be exploited in the context of classroom research.

The chapter that closes the historical section discusses *Karl Bühler's child psychology*. In this learned review, Frank Vonk relates Bühler's psychology of children to his philosophical, anthropological, and linguistic ideas, thus elucidating the status of his child psychology within its broader theoretical framework. He duly underscores the scholar's anti-behaviouristic approach, and draws attention to his emphasis on the differences between humans and animals, in particular apes.

The next part consists of essays as the genre is generally understood, that is, reflective contributions in which the author is more given to conveying his or her particular or personal, if not tentative, standpoint than to presenting conclusive evidence. David Block's *An exploration of the art and science debate in language education* is clearly in this vein. He examines the actual teaching practices of one particular foreign-language teacher, the quite phenomenal, and inimitable, Michel Thomas, considering whether or not Thomas's attested-to successes depend on 'personality' rather than on 'method'. He thus reiterates the important general issue of how the concept of language teaching as an objective and methodical activity — as a procedure that can be taught and mastered — relates to the idea that effective teaching is ultimately a matter of the teacher's unique individuality, sooner a matter of art than of science.

Quite originally, too, Roelien Bastiaanse draws a comparison between the linguistic performance of aphasics (as a general group) and that of a single second-language learner who managed to master L2 Dutch all by himself, that is without any explicit instruction. As indicated by the title of her chapter, *Phonology, lexical semantics and syntax in aphasia and natural language acquisition in adulthood*, Bastiaanse's case study contrasts phonological, vocabulary retrieval, and morphosyntactic skills. As she concludes, aphasics tend to perform relatively well as concerns the application of rules, but are generally poor in learning words, whereas the situation is precisely the reverse with the second-language learner.

Making special reference to the field of language teaching, Michael Byram elucidates why the various national education curricula are necessarily a part of a state's national and economic policy. His essay *Language teaching as political action* shows that contrary to the idea that language education by and large involves the passing on of a set of value-neutral skills and competences, language teaching is inevitably a kind of political activity. Drawing on various relevant and instructive data, Byram cogently argues the necessity for foreign-language teachers of realising the political force-field they are in, and of being alive to the political duties and responsibilities entailed by the profession.

In an entertaining essay *How's this for fun?*, Péter Medgyes addresses the question of why the current ELT coursebooks are apt to shun humorous examples. Contrasting the present somewhat 'tedious' situation in the ELT classroom to the 'laughing matters' that were once a matter of course in the context of foreign-language teaching, he makes a case for the use, if not the necessity, of humorous components in ELT. Medgyes may well have a point here.

In a thought-provoking essay entitled *Identity and differentiation of the lexicon through language corpora*, Natalia Gvishiani meticulously explores the boundaries between polysemy and homophony in lexical semantics, persuasively arguing that corpus study is a prerequisite for drawing the line between polysemy (identity) and homophony (differentiation).

As Uta Thürmer's contribution bears out, the recognition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as the prime lingua franca of science, the media, and other spheres of life has encouraged substantial research into the language variety itself as well as into the processes of ESP teaching and learning. *ESP — a variety of English and/or a type of language course?* reviews the main approaches to ESP, and identifies a special variant of English, namely, Generic Scientific English, a category of language use that partakes of certain features of ESP yet differs from it in relevant respects, in that it encompasses properties of both the everyday and the scientific registers.

Given that all adequate linguistic performance depends on both grammatical knowledge and pragmatic, social, and world knowledge, any process of language learning — be it the mother tongue or a foreign language — unavoidably extends to the ability of integrating these different forms of knowledge. As an example of the intricate relationship between linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge, Titus Ensink and Harrie Mazeland minutely examine the various uses and functions of Dutch *ander* ('other', 'different'). As they argue, *ander* and its variants (*andere*, *anderen*, *anders*) enable language users to reason within categories, in that they bring about a complementary categorisation of items in a set. On the basis of a detailed analysis the authors of *Categorising in discourse* propose a taxonomy of discourse functions by which the use of *ander* can be explained.

Discussing examples from various languages and dialects, Werner Abraham argues in favour of a description of the word orders verb-first, verb-second, and verb-last in terms of discourse function and parsing strategy. As pointed out in *SVOV in German and Dutch* — an essay that can be conceived of as bridging the gap between unequivocal essays and fully-fledged studies, that is, our next subdivision — the V2/V1-Vlast skeleton provides room for expressing discourse function without the need for additional movement mechanisms such as clefting, while V2 clearly sets the subject apart for parsing purposes. Abraham brings up that current generativist thinking about word order is mistaken in ignoring such pragmatic factors.

The third section includes studies that present and discuss the results of more or less extensive linguistic research. Jan Berenst's *Literacy in Dutch of*

poorly schooled adult immigrants from the Netherlands Antilles, for example, reports on a broad-scale research project aimed at the assessment of the proficiency in Dutch of adult migrants from the Antilles who enjoyed little education. The issue underlying the project is that their oral and writing skills in Dutch do not suit the linguistic prerequisites of the job training programmes in which they usually enrol. Berenst distinguishes between two general 'profiles': trainees who perform relatively well in L2 Dutch, since they are apt to employ top-down strategies in text comprehension and writing tasks, as opposed to trainees who perform inadequately, given their propensity for completely focussing on formal L2 aspects. As the author stipulates, these findings should have a bearing on the development of educational programmes aimed at the integration of the grouping concerned in Dutch society.

As *Medical discourse as professional and institutional action* by Christopher N. Candlin clearly gives forth, medical encounters tend to be inherently intertextual and interdiscursive events in modern society. Taking medical discourse for his touchstone, he challenges the generic integrity of most professional and organisational discourse types, explaining the huge bearing of this view on the field of LSP studies as a whole. As Candlin contends, LSP research is much in need of a comprehensive model that integrates the textual, discoursal, and actional elements of institutional communication — his chapter provides a useful outline of the requisites of such an approach.

In *Content- and language-integrated learning, culture of education and learning theories*, Piet Van de Craen discusses the advantages of multilingual education (ME) from the perspective of a theory of language learning. In ME, language knowledge is not the ultimate aim but a vehicle of instruction. As he establishes, the reason why ME works better than traditional approaches is that it is an implementation of a learning theory that takes the entire 'culture of education' into account.

Adopting a pragmatic/communicative view on the process of foreign- and second-language learning, Jeanine Deen and Hilde Hacquebord discuss the issue of content-based language instruction in the multilingual classroom. Supplying detailed data pertaining to one specific content area, mathematics, their *Content-based language teaching* shows that particular characteristics of classroom interaction further the acquisition of mathematical concepts, while other interactional features are highly detrimental in that regard.

As concerns the role of native language in the process of second-language acquisition and the emergence of 'interlanguages', Peter Jordens in *Theoretical approaches to second-language learner varieties* addresses himself to a

fundamental issue that has recently come to the fore in applied linguistics, namely, the question of how L1 knowledge interacts with innate linguistic knowledge and/or universal cognitive constraints on language learning. In his perceptive article, he critically examines the competing theoretical approaches to L2 learning with respect to their claims on L1 knowledge as the basis for L2 acquisition, mechanisms that drive L2 development, and constraints on the ultimate attainment of the L2 system.

In *The role of form in language learning*, Leo van Lier takes sides in a much-debated issue in applied linguistics, arguing that the general rejection of the traditional Grammar Translation language teaching should not imply a rejection of attention to language form. Walking the fine line between grammatical and pragmatic approaches, he contends that linguistic form, or grammar, should be one of the topics of discussion in an interactive learning environment. As he insists, language learning should take place as part of a semiotic activity of a richly varied nature, and within an environment of triadic interactions, language emerges.

In their considered *A methodology for evaluating the effectiveness of vocabulary treatments*, Paul Meara and Ignacio Rodríguez Sánchez develop a way of testing long-term vocabulary uptake without large-scale laboratory settings and related problems of comparing two different test groups and vocabulary sets. Their auspicious new method involves the assessment of the expected vocabulary increase over time without explicit training, so that a difference with actual vocabulary uptake provides an indication of the effect of vocabulary training.

In *The place of knowledge about language in the mother tongue and foreign language curriculum*, Rosamond Mitchell and Christopher Brumfit are concerned with the important issue of language awareness. The authors render a comprehensive account of their noteworthy on-going research into methods of promoting an explicit understanding of the nature of language among pupils.

What follows is a number of what are generally reports, namely, renderings of the state-of-the-art in a specific field, or with respect to a specific method, of language education. Thus Wout van Bekkum and Hans Hamburger are currently developing a method of presenting Hebrew grammar through alphabetised entries. Their chapter, *Towards an alphabetical grammar of Modern Israeli Hebrew*, provides a general outline of the joint enterprise, and offers an ample amount of exemplary entries, as well as a short but helpful history of the Hebrew language.

In *The use of word frequency data in the teaching of English as an alternative/additional language*, Michaël Goethals reviews some presently held ideas

concerning lexical frequency research and its application to foreign-language teaching. After discussing the pros and cons of teaching/learning high-frequency words, he points out, making special reference to experiments and experiences with the recently developed *European English Teaching Vocabulary-list*, the prospects for further developments in research and education, stressing the crucial point that language teaching/learning, EFL included, is a complex 'ecological' process, hence that word frequency is closely interrelated with various other factors.

Pierre Kouraogo reports on an on-going action research project regarding the effectiveness of self-correction tasks in the context of EFL, giving due weight to the particularities of EFL teaching in an overall input-poor environment such as, in the case concerned, Burkina Faso, a French-speaking country. After describing the different methods involved in the project, such as teacher-guided correction, peer correction, and self-correction, *Helping advanced EFL learners improve their written English through self-correction tasks* discusses the general trends indicated by the provisional results, and provides a tentative categorisation of errors, along with useful suggestions of how they can be dealt with in the course of EFL programmes.

A web-based foreign-language assistant by John Nerbonne and Petra Smit reports on Glosser/RuG, a newly developed World Wide Web application for interactive language learning, and discusses several of the programming difficulties for getting smooth information flow that the research group encountered.

Finally, Aud Marit Simensen's *Subject didactics as the science of the foreign-language teaching profession* surveys the position of subject didactics within the field of educational linguistics, particularly gauging its contribution to, and potential for, teacher training. To exemplify her views, Simensen offers an edifying description of the M.A./Ph.D. programme of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFOL) in contemporary Norway, and reviews some recently concluded as well as some on-going TEFOL research projects at the universities of Oslo and Bergen.

The editors
Groningen, January 2001

Arthur van Essen

as seen by another professional, the late W. R. Lee OBE MA PhD

For many years I have known Professor Arthur van Essen professionally, and in recent years I have also got to know him personally. He has made a very big contribution to English studies in the Netherlands and indeed in Europe generally and I believe it is time to see him honoured in a traditional way. I gather that there are several senior people in the profession who think so too, and I would like to add my own voice.

The son of a stationmaster, Arthur van Essen was born in Rotterdam in 1938. Here he attended primary and secondary school. After leaving school, he started as a shipping clerk in the Port of Rotterdam in 1954. His work brought him into contact with Britain, with which his company was trading. He subsequently served in the Royal Netherlands Air Force and was then employed for several years by Lloyd's Register of Shipping. It was at this time, no doubt, that he laid the foundation for his exceptionally good practical command of English.

He began teaching English as a foreign language in Rotterdam in 1962, and taught in several state schools. During this period he began to plan and direct regular in-service training courses for language teachers on behalf of the Dutch Ministry of Education and since 1971 he has been at the University of Groningen, where he is now a full Professor and Director of Studies in the Faculty of Arts, responsible for degree courses in Applied Linguistics and Language Pedagogy as well as for the training of several hundred students in other departments of his faculty.

Professor van Essen has M.A.s in English and Linguistics from the University of Leiden and a Ph.D. from the University of Utrecht. He has been an active member of Levende Talen, the Dutch Modern Language Association, since the early 1960s and an equally active member of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) since its foundation in 1967 and has contributed challenging papers and discussion at

Editors' note: This text was kindly supplied by Monica Lee from the files of her father; it was augmented and updated by Alice van Essen.

many of its international conferences. He was the principal organiser of its conference in Groningen in 1984, and was shortly afterwards elected Deputy Chair of IATEFL – the first non-native speaker of English ever to be elected to that post – an appointment which carries with it automatic succession to the chairmanship; unfortunately, however, owing to a serious operation, he was unable to take the appointment up. In 1990 he played a very active role in founding the Networking European Language Learning Expertise (NELLE) association, of whose advisory board I am a member, and has worked hard not only to promote its success but to ensure a friendly and co-operative relationship with other professional associations.

He has published more than a hundred articles and books on theoretical and practical aspects of language and language study, as can be seen from the list of his writings included in this volume. Finally, not only is it hard to exaggerate the importance of his contribution to language study or the training of language teachers over a period of several decades, but it must be said also that he has kept up-to-date in his direct, and affectionate, acquaintance with different parts of the UK by spending his family holidays there, usually camping, every summer for more than twenty-five years, and until recently.

On 1 December 2000 Arthur has officially retired, but he will continue to coach Ph.D. students and continue to attend the meetings of the European Language Council (ELC), on to which he was elected last year. And he is likely to be seen at other international gatherings as well. But apart from these more professional pursuits Arthur has many other interests, such as the study of Hebrew, the origins of Christianity, steam engines, and last but not least keeping an old Triumph sports car roadworthy.

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Part One

History of linguistics

Chapter 1

Linguistics, historicism and the humanities

Jan Koster

1. Introduction

From the point of view of a theoretical linguist, the period that covered most of Arthur van Essen's academic career, the second half of the twentieth century, was extremely interesting. It was a time of big changes, both in the field of linguistics and in the Dutch university system. What I would like to do here is to highlight a few of the cultural phenomena and changes that both Arthur and I were witness to and to express my current attitude towards those developments.

When I became a university student in 1963, Dutch philosophy, both in the university and in the public arena, was dominated by phenomenology and existentialism. Interest in phenomenology was oriented towards figures like Husserl, Heidegger, Jaspers and Merleau-Ponty, while the more popular and life-style-oriented existentialism venerated heroes like Sartre and Camus. All of these philosophers came from the Old World and it is therefore not obviously true that European culture was instantaneously Americanised as a result of the Second World War. Even the analytic philosophers of the other winner of the war, Great Britain, were hardly known outside small circles of specialists.

I remember that I spent all the money I could on cheap pocket books (Arthur will remember the *Aula* series) to find out more about existentialism and phenomenology. I did not understand much of all those unreadable introductions and soon lost my interest in current philosophy. I think this kind of reaction was not uncommon among philosophically interested students of my generation.

All of that changed as a result of J. F. Staal's article *Zinloze en Zinvolle Filosofie* in *De Gids* of 1967.[1] For me at least, it came as an enormous relief to read that it was not my personal failure that I did not understand Heidegger and that all those phenomenological and existential philosophies were just meaningless nonsense. Starting a little bit earlier, the then most famous Dutch novelist Willem Frederik Hermans had drawn attention to Wittgenstein and the

Wiener Kreis, and for a little while there was a vivid interest in Frege, Quine, Wittgenstein, Strawson, Ryle and other analytic philosophers.[2] Staal pointed out that Chomsky's rationalism went a step beyond the limitations of the empiricist philosophers. All of this sounded enormously appealing to me and when I found out that you could combine such philosophical interests with the empirical handwork of linguistics, I had at last found my intellectual niche.

Needless to say, that also had to do with Chomsky's political interests. The general intellectual climate in Holland in the second half of the 1960s became rather leftist and the short-lived interest in analytical philosophy was soon superseded by a passion for Marxism and its variants. Not being a Marxist myself, I found Chomsky's ideas also very attractive from this perspective because they combined interest in radical social reform with non-Marxist, more mind-oriented ideas about a universal human nature and the non-authoritarian forms of social organization that I knew from (and admired in) the Dutch anarchistic tradition (with figures like Arthur Lehning and others).[3]

As in most of the Western world, this interesting cultural climate did not really survive the restoration of the Reagan-Thatcher years. The *Zeitgeist* underwent enormous transformations and — speaking about the more privileged segments of society — whole generations have grown up who are much more interested in stock-market gambling and in e-commerce than in radical social reform. To the extent there is still public interest in philosophy, it is dominated by some form of postmodernism, which in its usual popular interpretation is just a kind of cultural relativism. As in the US, names like Heidegger have become fashionable again and many sought to find inspiration in the works of French philosophers like Derrida or somewhat more transparent thinkers like the American philosopher Richard Rorty.

What I would like to argue here is that the impression of philosophical variation in the post-war period was more apparent than real. Existentialism, the ideas of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, British analytic philosophy, popular Marxism and postmodernism are all different, but in one important respect — perhaps *the* most important respect — these philosophies are very similar and stand in opposition to the kind of rationalism underlying modern linguistics and cognitive science as inspired by Chomsky, Fodor and others. I would like to refer to this similarity as 'the received view of the humanities'. This view, as I see it, emerged in the early nineteenth century as the combined result of British empiricism and German Romantic thought.

According to the received view of the humanities, cultural phenomena (including language) should not be seen as the expression of universal princi-

ples, but as things that are 'historically determined'. In this view, the manifestations of the human mind are historically contingent or, at best, the result of 'laws' applying to realities *external* to the human mind. According to the rationalistic alternative, the human mind has rich intrinsic and universal properties, which are based on biological and ultimately physical necessity. The empiricist/Romantic view emphasizes the uniqueness of cultural phenomena and therefore often entails a certain amount of cultural relativism. The rationalist view emphasizes the common ground of all humanity.[4]

Another consequence of the received view of the humanities is that there are what C. P. Snow once called 'two cultures', each with its own methodology and modes of understanding.[5] The humanities or 'Geisteswissenschaften' are supposed to avoid the quest for general laws and are instead encouraged to describe and understand 'the unique' in a mysterious process not found in the natural sciences, a process known as 'Verstehen' (Wilhelm Dilthey).[6]

Modern theoretical linguistics challenges this dichotomy of the sciences and the humanities and assumes that there is only one form of rational inquiry, namely the one exemplified by the natural sciences. Needless to say, most of human reality is currently (and perhaps forever) beyond scientific understanding and in many cases we have to rely on our common sense. However, the received view of the humanities is much more than just a plea for common sense understanding. It is a dogmatic ideology about the nature of cultural phenomena and it has often precluded progress even in areas in which normal scientific thinking is possible, such as in the case of language. In linguistics, for instance, it has led to the obviously false but still influential idea that each language should be understood on its own terms and that non-trivial generalizations about language cannot be made and should therefore not be pursued.

The damaging and ideologically motivated idea of the 'two cultures' has affected both scientists and scholars in the humanities and it has often made modern linguistics the odd man out in our academies. The received view of the humanities is 'gesunkenes Kulturgut': we are hardly aware of its ideological function, it is a nearly self-evident part of a typical intellectual education in our society and therefore an optimally effective form of indoctrination.

2. The assault on human nature

In the 1960s in Holland, when analytical philosophy claimed a place under the sun next to the dominating phenomenology, some Dutch philosophers

surprisingly claimed that Wittgenstein and British analytical philosophy on the one hand and continental philosophy with figures like Heidegger on the other hand were not all that different after all (see for instance van Peursen 1968). At the time, this was a remarkable insight because Heidegger and the British philosophers of language were often considered opposite extremes on some scale of rationality. Some decades later, we see that the similarities are confirmed by many philosophers all over the world. Rorty (1980), for instance, clearly bases his philosophy on both traditions.

Personally (and relatively speaking), I find Ryle and Strawson exemplars of rationality compared to Heidegger, but the widely felt similarities have an interesting basis in reality. British empiricism and German Romanticism had a common effect and jointly formed the basis of the received view of the humanities: they undermined the idea of a rich and universal human nature, particularly the idea of such a nature as rooted in forms of biological and (meta)physical necessity. This is what the offspring of British empiricism (Darwinism, positivism and behaviourism) and German Romanticism (Wittgenstein, Heidegger, existentialism and phenomenology) had in common.

Chomsky (1975: 128–9) cites Gramsci and Lucien Malson, who argued that Marxist and other modern innovations of thought did away with the idea of a fixed and immutable human nature. Chomsky paraphrases Malson as categorically asserting

> that 'the idea that man has no nature is now beyond dispute'; the thesis that man 'has or rather is a history,' nothing more, 'is now the explicit assumption of all main currents of contemporary thought,' not only Marxism, but also existentialism, behaviourism, and psychoanalysis.

If there is no fixed human nature, the human mind at birth is usually seen as a blank slate, to be written upon by environmental contingencies. The human mind thus conceived is extremely malleable, also in the recent words of Rorty (1998: 169–70):

> We are much less inclined than our ancestors were to take 'theories of human nature' seriously [. . .]. We are much less inclined to pose the ontological question 'What *are* we?' because we have come to see that the main lesson of both history and anthropology is our extraordinary malleability.

From an empirical point of view, this statement is just absurd, as amply demonstrated by modern linguistics. But even from the point of view of common sense, such opinions strike me as pure dogmatism and obvious