

Linguistics and Language Teaching

The very title of my paper seems an odd juxtaposition these days, because my main subject—and one of my chief regrets—is the extent to which Slavic linguistics has moved away from language teaching—the teaching of Slavic languages—during the course of the last thirty or forty years.

This comment raises, in turn, the question of what is Slavic linguistics and what is it supposed to do. That it is supposed to examine all areas of Slavic languages and their structures seems indisputable. That it is supposed to bring the facts and patterns of these structures close to persons uninformed about them—both those who know one or more Slavic languages and those who do not—also seems reasonably beyond debate. But that it is supposed to play a role in teaching Slavic languages to persons who don't know them is much more debatable, because you teach what you already know, so that activity in and of itself does not move back the frontiers of knowledge.

But is this really true! For one thing, it flies in the face of the opinions of practically all persons who have taught Russian and other Slavic languages: namely, that you never learn more about a language than when you teach it. Outside of the classroom proper, at the writing level, constructing a textbook of a Slavic language, similarly, isn't supposed to reveal much about the language: textbooks aren't research, and they usually won't get you tenure or, certainly, not as readily a fine monograph might. But perhaps that depends on the textbook. Many textbooks of modern languages today, as we know, focus mostly on communicative aspects, on developing active skills and, hence, highlight the methodology needed to acquire these skills. But what about reference grammars, to which older (or old-fashioned) textbooks were actually much closer than most of today's modern textbooks! These were books which purported to describe a language, which is not the same as teaching it. Or are these activities and goals really that mutually exclusive!

The application of the teachings of descriptions of a language in a pedagogical context is called applied linguistics. This means you use linguistics for something, not just ponder it. You try to make a language accessible to students by teaching them its linguistic structures. You describe these structures as economically as possible, so that the learner can generate the correct sounds, forms and sentences of a Slavic language as accurately—and as comfortably—as possible. If you write a textbook, particularly one that leans toward being a reference grammar, you do this by describing the language as efficiently as possible, using, of course, information and research on the language already extant. This is not dissimilar to what linguistic monographs do, albeit most focus in greater detail on a specific area of the grammar. I think that, in certain important ways, there may not be—or doesn't have to be—all that much difference between the two procedures.

The difference would seem to be, of course, that monographs are driven by theory or they propose and elaborate new theories, while textbooks use the results of theories. Theory, of course, is pretty much unassailable these days. Yet it has the potential drawback: it often departs from apodeictic assumptions (often not even the author's but somebody else's), and focuses on a very narrow area, itself often not previously explored. This means that the monograph's assumptions haven't been tested in any general crucible and, in most cases, probably won't be. The most that can happen is that two or three other persons—or one other person—who is in on the author's theory and often has developed the theory in concert with the author—are the sole evaluators of the value of the new research. The theory then becomes circular, and its proponents

often just keep affirming the value of each other's work, which they esteem because it is often so similar to their own. That's human nature.

The writer of a *textbook like a reference grammar* can't hide this way. His material is there for all to see, people of all persuasions and experiences who have in common only the fact that they know the language in question. He or she is much more vulnerable when exposed to this much broader audience. And for the vastly broader audience of those who are trying to learn the language, the perpetrator is more vulnerable still. The learners necessarily lack sophistication, of course, but they look at the material from a fresh standpoint, and the *ostranenie* of people learning a language can be as refreshing as Tolstoy's Natasha looking at her first opera. And this audience is ruthless: it can spot a phony a mile away. And it can be much more judgmental than linguists' colleagues.

The writer of a *communicative textbook*, though, can hide, because he or she doesn't have to expose him or herself to the audience anymore than the theoreticians do. He or she can hide by not teaching and, perforce, describing any grammar. He or she can also hide behind today's aural/oral techniques, visual technology and the almighty computer. The endless tapes, cassettes and television tidbits deal in practical dialogues and in the puny or non-existent grammatical formulations typical of so many of today's Russian textbooks. Grammar is not made explicit but taught by hearing and seeing examples. As we all should know, though, a child can learn his native language this way and spends its first ten to twenty years doing it, but a Russian student lacks the child's imitative skills and has only five hours a week (sometimes less) over, let's say, 25 weeks of exposure to the target language during a year course. That's 125 hours. In my experience, even geometrically more exposure doesn't result in much more. I studied Russian at what is now called the Defense Language Institute for 30 hours a week over 46 weeks, a total of 1,350 hours. That's over ten times the college course, but the actual competence of even the best graduates was estimated at about two college years (and actual credit given was, amazingly, only two years of high school Russian).

In any case, we see that the theorist hides or can hide by making or keeping his material as arcane and inaccessible as possible, while the communicative language teacher hides or can hide by replacing grammar with attractive dialogues and attractive technology. The writer of a descriptive grammar of a language, be it a reference book or a survey of a language in a collection (such as the recent Comrie and Corbett volume) has no such refuge; he must strut his stuff for all to see.

I'm very old-fashioned as a language teacher, as I freely admit. I think the modern teaching of Slavic languages have moved way too far from the theory driven substantial grammatical analysis in reference grammars to the communication driven grammarless modern textbooks. Forty years ago trained Slavic linguists were directly involved in teaching Slavic languages and some wrote textbooks for these languages. Horace Lunt didn't just write articles about Old Church Slavonic; he wrote a reference grammar (called *Old Church Slavonic Grammar*) which was the monograph of its time. He also wrote a Russian textbook called *Fundamentals of Russian*, which was one of the first serious Russian textbooks, precisely because it was descriptive and demanding; i.e., it demanded that the user generate forms from efficient rules and not just learn dialogues and listen to tapes. Alexander Lipson and others also wrote excellent textbooks based on recent discoveries about Russian. Major linguists like Alexander Schenker and Thomas Magner wrote textbooks for Polish and Serbo-Croatian, respectively. The point was that Slavic linguistics looked for ways to apply results of theoretical (their own or others') directly in the classroom. The much ballyhooed Jakobsonian one-stem very system is undoubtedly the best example, but many other parts of the grammar were described and taught "structurally" in Slavic language classes. Alexander Lipson and I wrote Russian textbooks

teaching the one-stem system actively. Though it lives on in one or two of today's modern textbooks, it is not really used systematically or rigorously and is almost always usually incidental to the rest of the book.

Today's publishers, as we all too often note, tap into the technological aspect and pay scant attention to grammatical descriptions. In the old days, publishers' "runners" often had a good working knowledge of the languages involved or, in some cases, had actually gotten degrees and taught them themselves. This enabled them to render informed judgments for their publishing houses on textbook manuscripts. These days are, of course, long gone. Many houses previously noted for being tirelessly discriminating will now publish almost anything submitted to them in decent camera ready copy: no more editors to comb through things. This, in turn, launches a new generation of language textbook writers who are similarly unconcerned with grammatical analysis or consider it an actual disadvantage, and those publishers who still require evaluation by referees, depend for their opinions on newly minted people who look at technology and communication first and at grammar second.

The endless insistence on communication and aural-oral skills at the expense of passive skills ignores, I think, a basic truth of foreign-language learning which is an unpopular viewpoint nowadays, but a realistic one nonetheless. And that is that we learners of a foreign language who have not had very early and very sustained exposure to that language from an early age cannot learn to speak the target language with really total command and real colloquial ease. Fifteen to twenty (or more) years of opportunity for real fluency (the first fifteen or more years of one's life) are gone forever and not recoverable. We have not learned the countless words, expressions, ways of expressing things based on repeated, real experience and we will not learn them or will learn only a fraction of them, because we have not had that experience. Even if we learn grammar well, there is simply a point beyond which we cannot go. Listen carefully to European speakers who have acquired English. Even those who have been in the United States for many years can only rarely really handle our extremely complex and nuanced tense system or our impossible modal verbs, not to mention correct use of articles, the most recognized bane of speakers whose languages lack them (but native speakers of languages that have them, like French or German, don't always fare much better trying to learn our usage). Those foreigners who do speak reasonably grammatically we call fluent, but if we listen to them carefully it is what they don't say that stands out. They speak carefully and avoid tackling really complex structures and simply say what they are sure of, mostly correctly. And their vocabularies are based almost entirely on what they have in common with us from their experience: general knowledge of the world, abstract things we can all read about when we're grown up. We've all noticed how difficult it can be to understand and speak to children in a foreign language. This is because we haven't shared and can't share their experience. Areas of simple daily life can be just as trying. Keep us out of the kitchen and the workshop; most of know only one word for 'bean' or 'hammer'; the real native knows several and knows which is which. Straight lexical items can, of course, be learned, but much more inaccessible are what one German speaker referred to in a conversation I had with him many years ago when I was trying to learn German: *Die Ausdrücke des täglichen Lebens* (the expressions from everyday life). I thought my Czech was pretty great while discussing politics and comparing personal experiences, but then I tried to help them some friends rake leaves and do other things in their yard. I might as well have been trying to communicate in Urdu. If you're lucky, you eventually learn that Czechs have the same word (*zahrada*) for 'yard' and 'garden', and that's useful, but it isn't much to build on.

However, this is precisely my point. Since we have no possibility of learning the whole schmier, let's work and do well with what we *can* do. We can learn to speak grammatically and with reasonable efficiency. What we can really learn to do, though, is read very well without a

dictionary and write quite decently. These two skills are really within our grasp, areas in which we can shine. But they are obviously utterly dependent on mastery of the grammar. Everyone recognizes, of course, that writing is grammar-dependent, but not everyone realizes that reading is. The devaluation of translation into English as a grammar teaching device is one of the concessions to communication that has done the most damage, because very rigorous translation into our native tongue is not only by far the best way of learning to read very well, it is the only process we can perform actually better than the native speakers of the target language, a psychological benefit in itself that should perhaps not be underrated.

The present aural-oral approach and new technology in Russian language teaching, of course, has meant more emphasis on phonetics, which was often sorely missing in older courses, and the oral pattern drills are very helpful for grammar, at least to the extent that it is taught. But the two remaining areas, on whose mastery reasonably sophisticated learning of Russian depends, are seriously slighted in the new approaches. Syntax is inaccessible in both of its instantiations: generative grammar, whose work in its present form is usually inaccessible to language students, as it is to any Slavist who doesn't make a sustained effort to learn it; and the classroom, where the failure to emphasize advanced grammar makes learning practical syntax inaccessible *perforce*. But learning to read properly is, perhaps, even more dependent on some confrontation with semantics, whose mastery is well-nigh impossible without explicit translation exercises. I myself have written several articles on the subject of "Small Words that are Big Problems" (the title of one of them), which boils down to a kind of practical or applied semantics (прикладная семантика). The inability of many Russian scholars—in philological as well as non-philological areas—to read Russian decently is by now legendary. They read poorly and misinterpret what they read simply because no one ever made them translate unedited Russian prose rigorously. The problem of small words, grammatical items (the so-called служебные слова: и, ведь, вообще) are fairly well known, though still paid scant attention. More elusive, but just as important, is the miscomprehension of hundreds of lexical items (the знаменательные слова).

One quick case in point. My experience has been that many of our Slavists, even specialists in Russian, or us, for that matter, do not recognize the reduced meaning of the verb *гласить*, which has lost its former transitive nominal meaning 'announce' and means simply 'reads' or 'runs'; e.g., *Первый абзац гласит следующее* 'The first paragraph reads (runs) as follows.' People think it means 'sounds', so they translate 'sounds like the following'. Rigorous translation courses correct hundreds of such misconceptions and, perhaps more important, make the non-native speaker a rigorous and honest translator when he reads texts on his own. He will then realize that 'announces' is certainly wrong and 'sounds' isn't quite right either. Then if he's honest with himself—or curious enough—he may look in a dictionary and discover that *glasit'* has *only* the above meaning (a look at the Oxford Dictionary tells him this directly and gives two absolutely clear examples: "документ гласит следующее" 'the paper runs as follows' and "как гласит поговорка" 'as the saying goes'. Now a single, seemingly slight misanalysis like this is no huge disaster, but hundreds of misanalyses like it add up to considerably less than full comprehension of Russian. Most important, though, is that this much higher level of competence is something that is within our reach, and within the reach of our students if we can persuade ourselves of its importance and then, when teaching, persuade them. Most of us cannot learn to speak anywhere near on the level of the native speaker's (I don't care how many times we write 4's and 5's on recommendations for ourselves or others). But we can learn to read with well-nigh full comprehension.

In closing here, I have made a number of critical remarks about today's elementary Russian textbooks, and I feel I should demonstrate what I am talking about, rather than taking unsubstantiated potshots. David Freedel, one of our Slavic graduate students, has recently been finishing up a dissertation which compares presentation of basic phonology and spelling and certain aspects of morphology in what are probably the four most widely used current textbooks in our field and contrasts them to how he would do it himself, in this case a comparison which is not academic, since he has already compiled elementary and second-year textbooks which are in use in our Russian courses at Princeton—and achieved, by the way, quite spectacular results. I will mention none of the textbooks by name but simply list several unquestionably serious errors from each of the four books, with my comments in *italics* below the statements:

From the First Book:

- 1) “И краткое, short *i*, looks like **и** with a hat on. It is pronounced like the letter *y* in *boy*. И краткое is used only in combination with other vowels, for example: ...”

*Have we really regressed to calling the consonant **j** (or **y**) a vowel!*

- 2) “The letters **е**, **ж**, **и** and **ю** start with a distinct *y*-sound at the beginning of a word and after another vowel.”

But don't they also occur after soft signs and hard signs!

- 3) “The vowel in second person singular through second person plural endings is **е** in the first conjugation and **и** in the second conjugation.”

*But shouldn't it be pointed out that this spelling **е** is never actually pronounced [e] (but [o] when stressed and [i] when unstressed)!*

- 4) “The third person pronouns *his*, *her*, and *their* have one form only, identical to the object form of personal pronouns.”

What about него, её and их!

From the Second Book:

- 5) The letter **е**
“Generally [yeh] when stressed; [ih] when not stressed.”

These transcriptions are quixotic to say the least. And what does [ih] mean, and is [jeh] appropriate after soft paired consonants! And why does one have, the other lack [y]!

- 6) Instrumental Endings: Masculine/Neuter Singular
“-ом/-ен с акцентом с мужем с учителем”

How about словарём!

- 7) “The conjugation of **нести** (*to carry*) is similar to that of **идти**.”

This will be news to whoever studies these verbs.

From the Third Book:

- 8) “Russian letters that look and sound somewhat like their English counterparts:

к, м, с(like *s* in *sail*—never **к**), **т, а, о**”

*What about **е**! And why not use **с** (as in *city*) for Russian **с**!*

- 9) “The **отчество** is derived from the father’s first name by adding a suffix to it (-овна for daughters, -ович for sons).”

What about -евна and -евич!

- 10) “Letter: **е** Approximate Pronunciation: when stressed, like **ye** in *yesterday*.”

Repeats the mistakes in the preceding two books (2 and 5 above).

- 11) “For foreign words ending in **-о, -и, or -у** the prepositional case looks the same as the nominative.”

*What about foreign words ending in **-е** (*шоссе, кофе*)!*

From the Fourth Book:

- 12) “The infinitive ending is **-ть**, in certain limited cases **-ти** or **-чь**.”

*No stress mark on **-му**, though the whole point is that it is stressed.*

- 13) “**ж, ш, ц, ч, щ** plus **о** in stressed endings:
ж, ш, ц, ч plus **е** in unstressed endings:”

*Why omit **щ** in second list, given *следующее, тощее*, etc!*

- 14) Prepositional Case of Possessive and Demonstrative Pronouns
“The primary endings for all modifiers are **-ом** for masculine and neuter and **-ой/-ей** for feminine.”

*Why include **-ей** for feminine but not **-ем** or **-ём** for masculine!*

All four books contain a great many other wrong formulations and shoddy explanations in addition to those listed above. Still, egregious as these errors of commission may seem, they pale in significance before errors of omission, the simple omission of necessary and cogent grammatical analysis. Of the four books examined, only one showed any systematic description of conjugation; the other three utterly lacked any real attempt at verbal classification, without

which assignment of conjugation cannot be understood, let alone less predictable information which must then be slavishly memorized for every verb. It is the failure to try to explain, the absence of analysis which, in my opinion, makes such grammars largely ineffectual. The compilers of these textbooks, I feel, may themselves have learned Russian without assimilating much overt grammar and they have not been taught to value what they have learned. Uncertain of how to describe grammar, they largely abstain from doing so, supported in their choice by the conventional wisdom that overt grammar inhibits communication and must be subordinated to it.

I think the above mistakes and the errors of omission I have just discussed should raise a red flag for our field. Slavic linguists make mistakes at grammar too and can make mistakes in describing it, of course, but at least grammatical analysis is, or should be, their business. I call on Slavic linguists to reinvolve themselves with pedagogy, get themselves more involved in teaching Slavic languages and writing Slavic language materials. I believe that Slavic linguistics cannot survive in any proper form if Slavic languages—and not just Russian, but Czech, Polish, Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, are not taught systematically and properly, with structured teaching materials of reasonable grammatical sophistication. We ourselves need to learn these languages very well to do our linguistics. Unless we somehow decide that Slavic languages are incidental to our linguistics, and then that is the end of Slavic linguistics or at least of that aspect of it whose purveyors seek to share the results of their research with Slavic language students in general, rather than circulating their results back and forth among themselves.

In conclusion let me say that I have been intentionally blind here to practical matters like enrollments and student preferences. Communication is in and grammar is out. But need the two be mutually exclusive! We all know that students mostly want to speak the target language, but any proper speaking, as we certainly know, depends on mastery of the grammar. Perhaps an adept language teacher, who knows proper grammar, can learn how to “smuggle it in” to the communicative aspect, so that students may actually like it. But to do this we must have the structured teaching materials I just mentioned, and we must have language coordinators who know enough Russian to believe in grammar and can assign and implement these materials.

Charles E. Townsend
Dept. of Slavic Languages & Literatures
028 E Pyne
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08544 USA
townsend@phoenix.princeton.edu