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THE UNDERGRADUATE LINGUISTICS PROGRAM

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When I studied linguistics thirty years ago, the subject was taught only on the graduate level. It was assumed that the student needed a background in anthropology, classics, or foreign languages before he would be ready to tackle the analysis of language qua language. Phonemic theory was approached after a thorough training in phonetics and a demonstrated ability to transcribe any language into IPA. The Ph.D. degree in General Linguistics required extensive field work. During the sixties the training of linguists changed radically from a social science empirical orientation to a strictly humanistic drill in logical thinking, an area largely covered by Philosophy Departments. (At Vanderbilt we have a strong Linguistics minor with the Ph.D. in Philosophy.) Field work was replaced by simple experiments in the psychology lab. The study of linguistics no longer needed extensive background in a subject matter and by itself became less time consuming. Eventually, it was possible to pursue an entire program in linguistics on the undergraduate level.

Financial support for graduate school was plentiful and for those who did not want to go on after their B.A., it was easy to find a job whatever their college major. B.A.'s in Linguistics did not know much beyond syntax about the structure of language and hardly anything at all about the use of language.

Eventually, with the shrinking job market of the seventies and with inflation nibbling at parental incomes, college students looked for two types of majors. Those that wanted employment upon graduation acquired skills that were directly applicable in engineering, business, or computer science. Those that planned to go on to professional schools wanted a liberal arts education which would give them a broad understanding of the real world. In addition, students paid close attention to what courses were deemed most appropriate by the admissions officers of the professional school of their choice. Graduate schools under consideration were in such professional areas as Pharmacy, Speech and Hearing, or Chemistry. The Humanities and the Social Sciences gradually became the preserve of foreign students. The latter lead primarily to teaching jobs and in this country these are not only scarce but also hold little prestige and pay less than many jobs requiring only a high school education. Americans can no longer subsist on an academic salary, not to mention the dismal return on the investment in time and tuition fees for a Ph.D. in Linguistics.

The eighties find a surplus of tenured professors of Linguistics. Graduate students are decreasing in number and the foreign students enrolled in Linguistics Programs are preparing for positions in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, or in Language Planning, or other fields of Applied Linguistics. Undergraduate students shun courses in theoretical linguistics and syntactic analysis but there are at least sufficient numbers of undergraduates on our campuses. As a consequence, departments of Linguistics are in the process of reassessing their offerings and gearing them to the interests of the current undergraduate population.

The problem with such attempts is how to make a program attractive while preserving its scholarly standards. I, for one, believe that the modernization of Linguistic programs will enhance their scholarly tenure. The rarefied atmosphere of looking into the structure of language with little or no concern for its function in society was not a solid scholarly approach to the subject matter. It is a good thing, in my opinion, that the turn of events is forcing a change in the direction of a more comprehensive presentation of the matter of language. Courses in Generative Phonology or in Advanced Syntactic Theory belong on the graduate level; not because they are intrinsically too difficult for undergraduates but because they crowd out the real basic courses that make for an understanding of language. Discussions on structuralism or on transformational grammar can not take the place of a solid Introduction to Language, where the form and function of language are carefully explored.

One more asset, in my opinion, is the much deplored career mindedness of today's undergraduates. It has forced the linguistic profession to come out of its ivory tower and see language as it is used--and abused--in the real world, by politicians, advertisers, and swearing athletes.

By looking at language in its natural occurrence rather than at isolated sentences, linguists met again with colleagues in other professions. The old association between linguists and anthropologists had been very fruitful and was continued by individual linguists but the profession as a whole no longer practiced it after the so-called Chomskyan revolution. The latter had the effect of virtually isolating linguistics from the other sciences, except for a group of psychologists who followed the Chomskyan paradigm and who claimed to be the only true psycholinguists.

During that period linguists really did not collaborate with colleagues from other disciplines. They limited themselves to teaching others how to apply the rules of transformational grammar. Luckily, since the mid-seventies the situation has improved and cross-fertilization obtains again. The first interdisciplinary congress

was held in Florence, Italy in 1972. I organized the International Symposium on First Language Acquisition with linguists, phoneticians, pediatricians, speech therapists, psychologists, and ethologists. It was also the first convention gathering child language specialists from all over the world to report on their work rather than relate everything to the current American grammatical theory. Interdisciplinary collaboration started on a timid scale but is now quite active thanks to the career mindedness of the students. To make linguistics programs viable, linguists had to establish contact with Speech and Hearing, to name one of the earliest of such associations.

In the Linguistics Programs which I have directed at Vanderbilt since 1965, the department of Speech and Hearing has been a close associate from the beginning. Over the years we established a pre-professional B.S. degree in Linguistics and Speech and Hearing. Students planning to go into Speech Pathology or Audiology start taking courses at the Bill Wilkerson Speech and Hearing Center in addition to courses in Linguistics, Psychology, and Sociology in the college. Vanderbilt does not offer an undergraduate degree in Speech and Hearing and this gives students a chance to try out courses in this field before they commit themselves to graduate school. The Linguistic component of their interdisciplinary major, in its turn, prepares them very well for their chosen field and our students gain admittance to the best graduate departments of Speech and Hearing, often with fellowships.

Another area of concentration is Linguistics and Communication. The B.A. degree in Communications leads to jobs in television, newspapers, and advertising. It is very popular at Vanderbilt and linguistics is an integral part of it. Language, after all, is part of communication. Face-to-face communication is multi-channeled. It is verbal and non-verbal. I started teaching Nonverbal Behavior in 1977 and enrollment has grown from a handful of students to over fifty in the one semester course which is offered yearly in the Fall. The course is cross-listed in the Drama and Speech Department of which Communications is part. Cross-listing gives Linguistics courses visibility. This is particularly important for freshmen who may have never heard of Linguistics and who may not look under that heading in the college catalog.

The course in Nonverbal Behavior although not cross-listed in the catalog with the Psychology Department is on their official list of courses recommended for majors. Such listing proves quite effective as the course attracts a large number of students from psychology.

Another Linguistics course which is cross-listed in the college catalog is Sociolinguistics. While the Department of Drama and Speech is in the Humanities Division, the Sociology Department is in the Social Sciences Division. This gives visibility to Linguistics in both

divisions. The cooperation with the Sociology Department is not as active as with the Communications Program but students see the listing and register.

The two most basic courses, Introduction to Language and Introduction to Linguistics, are not cross-listed in any department but are visible in the catalog among the courses which fulfill the distribution requirements in the Humanities. This makes it possible for students with a very tight schedule of obligatory courses to include these courses among their electives. The composition of students in these courses is most varied.

The course in Introduction to Language is designed to appeal to varied backgrounds and interests. It is an interdisciplinary course divided into the following headings: Introduction, Biological Foundations, Mass Media, Nonverbal Communication, Psycholinguistics, Sociolinguistics, Meaning, Language Change, and Written Language. At the end of each section there is an hour of discussion to tie in the various subheadings. Under the heading of Mass Media, for example, we have a series of speakers who talk about their professional expertise in Newspaper Writing, Radio Announcing, Television Script Writing, and the Interpretation of the Cinema. With the exception of the lecturer on the Cinema who is a professor, all other speakers come directly from the respective industries. Students enjoy listening to 'people from the real world'. The textbooks adequately cover the theoretical organization of these subject matters and hearing about the actual applied work is extremely profitable. What I have tried to develop in our Linguistics Program is an appreciation of language that is grounded on the use of language in the microcosm of face-to-face interaction and in the macrocosm of the professions, societal interaction, and in the problems of the political arena. Meaning is explored by a physician within doctor-patient interaction, in the giving of orders by managers presented by a specialist in that field; and by a law-professor with regard to legal language, besides the more conventional treatments in philosophy and literature. The course does not go into linguistic theories but prepares students for an appreciation of the complexity of the structure of language.

The latter is covered in Introduction to Linguistics. Some students take this course before the more general Introduction to Language and feel that this is the proper sequence. Others prefer to be exposed to the broader range of language use before they tackle the internal structure of language. Some students take either the one or the other of the two courses as each course is designed as a self-contained unit.

Besides the general Introduction to Linguistics we offer courses in Phonology, in Morphology, and in Historical Linguistics. As I am the

only linguist on campus, these courses are offered at irregular intervals. They were originally offered every year and then in alternate years. These courses no longer draw adequate enrollment. Of the three, the course which is considered most valuable by students is Morphology. Frequently, a student insists so much that he/she needs the course that I give it on an individual basis under the catalog number for Independent Study. The lack of interest in Phonology is readily explained by the paucity of foreign language majors in the linguistics courses. The majority of our foreign language departments actively discourage their students from taking Linguistics, both on the undergraduate and on the graduate level. This is a well known fact all over the country and I have not tried to fight it. My constituency comes mainly from other areas. The one foreign language department which encourages students to take Linguistics is not overly happy with the results. Most foreign language majors do fair to poorly in Linguistics. This may be due to their lack of aptitude for analytical research or to preconceived ideas about language which they bring to the course and which may interfere with the linguistic notions which they are required to learn. It is a matter which needs to be given more thought than I probably have devoted to it so far. Some language departments have hired their own linguists, which is good. Others teach Linguistics without much understanding of the subject matter, which is not good for their students. There is nothing I can do about it. This, too, is a familiar fact.

The only course in the Linguistics program which I do not teach personally is the one on Linguistics and Literature. It is taught in alternate years by a very competent colleague but the enrollment has been limited to less than five. This course, too, fulfills the distribution requirement in the Humanities.

As mentioned earlier, an hour of discussion follows each section in the Introduction to Language course. Participation by students is obligatory and I call on them by name. Their answers are part of the final grade. This procedure was initiated at the suggestion of a former student who is now pursuing the J.D. degree in the Vanderbilt Law School. He told me that college graduates were totally unprepared for Law School where they are 'put on the spot' and have 'to reason very fast'. In Law School they can not get a good grade by simply studying the subject matter and passing tests. The questions I put to the students during the discussion periods are purposely designed to check two things. One is whether the students understand the connection between the various sub-sections, such as the relationship between first and second language acquisition in the section on Psycholinguistics where two different speakers presented one lecture each on Child Language and one on Foreign Language Teaching. The second fact I want to verify is whether the students are able to relate the new information to their previous knowledge. A student majoring in economics will be

asked to talk about the possible financial problems involved in language planning. Generally, students come prepared to the discussion sessions and when they do not have an adequate answer are frequently stimulated enough to pursue the matter on their own. As the classes grow larger, the discussion sessions may have to become more numerous. The original enrollment in Introduction to Language four years ago was ten and is now fifty-five. All other classes in Linguistics have set aside sessions for informal discussion and I may decide to structure these in the more formal style of the Introduction to Language course.

All our Linguistics courses require a term paper. This is the most time consuming task for me but probably the one that contributes mostly to the success of the program. I allow students to choose their own topics and I strongly encourage field work. Recalling how much I learned while preparing my dissertation compared to all the books I read and the lectures I heard, I want my students to see language in action. A student may decide to compare the ethnography of speaking of males and females among his fellow students if this is what strikes his fancy. By selecting a topic of interest to him, a student will work harder and consequently gain more insight in the process. Language will become alive. In the course in Nonverbal Behavior the term paper consists of an empirical research project. The latter has to be written up in the form of a term paper and also has to be presented in class using an edited version of the original research videotape in addition to slides and transparencies to document his conclusions. The format of the presentation represents 10% of the student's grade in the course.

Many undergraduate students over the years have produced such innovative research projects that they warranted inclusion in scholarly publications and mention in the local newspaper. Some have presented their findings at professional meetings. Not infrequently students get so involved in their research that they expand on it after the course for an entire semester. They earn academic credit for this work and, most importantly, free the time for it by registering for 1-3 credit points of Independent Study. We meet at regular or irregular intervals and as often or as seldom as necessary. Undergraduate students are as capable of independent work as are graduate students.

Another way for undergraduate students to learn the techniques of linguistic research is to assist me in research of my own. This is called Directed Research and equally qualifies for 1-3 credit points Independent Study. The student runs experiments and compiles statistics and in so doing gains not only techniques for the analysis of verbal and nonverbal communication but also insight into the workings of language by seeing how it can be segmented and how it is perceived by the listener. Students read and summarize published material but only if it is part of their own research project. Otherwise the task is too similar to what goes on in the regular classroom.

In conclusion, if I may be permitted to make a suggestion from the experience with the program I have developed at Vanderbilt and from comments I received from students who took Linguistics courses elsewhere, I would like to say the following: Given the difficulty for majors in Linguistics to find employment upon graduation, I suggest interdisciplinary majors of the types that have proven most effective here, namely majors combining Linguistics with Communications, or with Foreign Languages and International Business, or with Business and Communications with emphasis on advertising, or with Mathematics for possible employment with the federal government. For students planning to go to graduate school in Speech and Hearing I suggest a preprofessional major in Linguistics and Speech and Hearing which includes courses in Psychology and Sociology. For pre-law students a major combining Linguistics, English, and Political Science is advisable. Pre-med students get much usefulness out of the course in the Nonverbal Behavior, especially if they plan to specialize in Psychiatry. Over the past years, pre-med students have taken their minor in Linguistics while majoring in one of the hard sciences.

The training of professional linguists, in my opinion, is better kept to the graduate level and even there students are more marketable if they combine Linguistics with an applied field, such as Speech and Hearing.

It is a good thing if undergraduate students take courses in Syntactic Theory and in Phonemics but if the choice of course offerings is limited or if students' time allotment is restricted, these courses should not be given priority over more comprehensive courses in General Linguistics. Students should be required to take courses in Communications and in Communication Theory not only for reasons of marketability but also because such courses put the study of Linguistics in its proper perspective as part of human interaction. Courses in anthropology and in psychology are as valid as courses in logic for an understanding of the structure of language.

The relationship between the structure of language and the use of language is not yet fully explored. It may turn out that this relationship involves more reciprocity than is known to us. I am not talking here of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The discussion of the latter, by the way, is a perennial favorite of my students and may constitute a good starting point to encourage the study of language.

Last but not least, I would like to mention the function of the Linguistic Circle. Often such lectures are geared to specialists rather than to interested generalists. During my sixteen years as chairman of the Nashville Linguistic Circle I have tried to invite first rate scholars but in the so-called marginal areas rather than in traditional linguistics. We had a one year series in Sociolinguistics which

attracted many undergraduate students and also faculty from several departments. The Circle also tries to have lectures on such hyphenated areas as Language and Cognition where the beginning student of linguistics can identify with the problem.

The philosophy of Linguistics for undergraduates should be to go from the known to the unknown. Students may not know much about the ethnography of speaking but they certainly have observed that only the dominant conversation partner may interrupt the speaker. The same students are unlikely to have ever thought about the aspiration of plosives in English. The sequence of courses which I suggest is moving from the periphery to the center rather than from the internal structure to the use of language.