GRAMM-R

ÉTUDES DE LINGUISTIQUE FRANÇAISE

Joëlle Aden, Trevor Grimshaw
& Hermine Penz (dir./eds.)

Enseigner les langues-cultures à l'ère de la complexité

Approches interdisciplinaires pour un monde en reliance

Teaching Language and Culture in an Era of Complexity

Interdisciplinary Approaches for an Interrelated World

P.I.E. PETER LANG

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Foreword

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It has been said that switching languages is like opening a door onto other worlds – new ways of speaking, thinking, and relating to things, people, events. When I switch to French, I find new ways of cutting up reality; I let myself be carried by the French words and their historic resonances. So it is with the notion of *la reliance*, a term that I now wonder how I ever lived without and that is so much prettier than abstract entities like 'relationality.' First coined by the Belgian sociologist Marcel Bolle De Bal in 1996 within a freemasonic worldview, social *reliance* was meant to denote rupture from social isolation and was synonymous with *appartenance*, i.e., belonging, affiliation. Extended since then to capture the general act of creating links, it has come to mean a principle of life ifself – the creation, recreation of webs of relations between people, objects and even with the self – an act that includes both thought and action (Maffesoli, 1996; Bolle De Bal, 2003; Morin, 2005). In that sense *reliance* is related to the Bakhtinian notion of *dialogism* (Holquist, 1996) with which it shares a desire to go beyond the Cartesian dualities of mind and nature and to engage the body, the emotions, and the imagination in a joint human enterprise. *Reliance* also shares with *dialogism* a profoundly ecological sense of ethical responsibility and agency. The timeliness of the notion of *reliance* has been attributed to the growing fragmentation of knowledge, people, opinions, and beliefs brought about by the Internet, the unpredictability of human behaviours and climate changes, and our growing inability to comprehend and control the consequences of our actions. *Reliance* has become the imperative of our times, and the response to our increased anxiety in a post-modern world (Bolle De Bal, 2003).

The papers in this collection offer variations on *la reliance* within a distinctly social constructivist framework appropriate for language education in uncertain post-modern times. While their authors all agree that the global exchange of goods, people and information requires more

than communicative competence of the functional kind, they all offer different ways of constructing links across disciplines, cultures and universes of beliefs. Some advocate a return to using literature and the imagination, others favor accessing learners' beliefs and value systems, and several call on educators to factor in affectivity and empathy in the language learning enterprise. All remind us of the crucial role that reflexivity plays in learning not only how to 'do things with words', but how to 'think and talk things into being' through language. As Edgar Morin says in his *Ethique de la reliance (2006)*, it is not just a matter of *faire*, but of *faire et comprendre* (doing and understanding). Such an understanding is not merely an intellectual exercise; it necessarily includes agency, symbolic power and symbolic action. From a relational perspective, language education, as an initiation in the use of another symbolic system, not only constructs utterances and speech acts, and solves communication problems, it also mediates other identities and worlds of signification. What underlies these papers is the conviction that learning a foreign language is more than the short term acquisition of a communicative instrument to act upon one's environment. It is a change in perspective that for some may lead to a change of beliefs and even to a change of heart. *Reliance* ultimately contributes to the development of complex thought (Morin, 1990) within an ethical, humanistic view of language and language education.

The Anglophone reader cannot but be reminded of similar calls for dialogue and interaction by language educators on the other side of the Atlantic. There too, there is talk of participation, collaborative learning, creating teams and partnerships, building links and making connections, and the 'reflexive practitioner' (Schön, 1984) has become a well known concept in foreign language education. However, the fact that the concept of *reliance* was born of the Human Sciences and that those of 'participation' and 'collaborative learning' come from a democratic tradition in the Social Sciences gives each a slightly different flavor. As a humanistic endeavor, language education strives to teach learners to speak differently in order to think differently; as a social science subject, foreign language instruction usually aims at teaching a usable skill that increases one's effectiveness on the job market. To be sure, the authors of these papers use the same concrete metaphors as American foreign language educators: *objects* of research, interactive *strategies*, psycholinguistic *operations*, pedagogic *tools* and *templates, scaffoldings, models* and *plans, elaboration* of practices and the *co-construction* of knowledge. These hands-on metaphors seem to suggest a common utilitarian concern for useful processes and practical results. But the toolbox these papers offer is the toolbox of the wordsmith (see Grimshaw, this volume) or the gardener (see Voise, this volume), not the

spreadsheet of the business entrepreneur or the teamwork of the social psychologist.

If the papers in this book join forces to construct anything, it is not a Tower of Babel, it is a world after Babel – a multilingual and multicultural world where meaning has to be not discovered but constructed, indeed invented (Zarate *et al*., 1988); where the invention of meaning has to go through difficult and complex connections that must be built in dialogue with others and in reflection upon oneself, and in the difficult task of finding the appropriate words for the appropriate moment with the appropriate person. Ultimately, *la reliance* is both a way of connecting us to others and ourselves, and a way of disconnecting us (*la déliance*) from the safe and predictable social destiny that a tower of Babel could provide. In that sense, *reliance* shows an affinity with a secular form of religion (from Lat. *re-ligare* = to bind) which has always been at the heart of the Human Sciences.

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INTRODUCTION

Relating Universes of Beliefs to the Language Classroom

A European View

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The title of the conference at the Université de Cergy-Pontoise includes two terms that point both to the diversity and to the complexity of themes discussed during the three days of presentations and workshops. These terms are *univers de croyance*, which brings with it not only a universe of beliefs but also a universe of accompanying theories, and *reliance*, or interdependence, which presents researchers with the task of finding a principled coherence and a unified paradigm within which theoretical insights and research findings may be made accessible and relevant to teachers of languages and culture. This is a daunting task, even more so in the light of what Joëlle Aden refers to in her conference introduction as the "asymmetries" to be found in current language teaching: "*Une asymétrie entre professeurs et élèves, élèves et locuteurs natifs, élèves et documents supports ou élèves entre eux.*" The overriding goal of the conference may thus be seen as the search for greater symmetry, both in theories and in practice.

For many years, the language classroom represented a safe and clearly structured haven for learners and teachers, in terms of both the language being learnt and the cultures of its speakers. In the case of the former, a view implicit in many teaching practices prevailed: i.e. that the skill of communicating in the foreign language could not be adequately developed inside the confines of the classroom. The teacher's responsibility therefore did not extend beyond teaching the linguistic code – grammar, lexis, pronunciation – as components of a knowledge-based system. These components were explained, practised and tested as discrete units in ways that took little account of whether the target

language could subsequently be used in actual cross-linguistic encounters. With the advent of the Communicative Approach to language teaching, where the development of language skills suddenly took centre stage, a step towards the realistic use of language was taken. The classroom became a place in which teachers sought to replicate 'real world' contexts and promoted the use of language for functional, albeit simulated, purposes. In the post-communicative era, however, due in particular to the mushrooming use of internet-based communication, which crosses national and language borders, and the increasing mobility of young people throughout Europe and beyond, it could be said that language learning has partly left the safe and structured confines of the classroom and become located in the real world. Whereas in the Communicative Approach, communication was *realistic* but *simulated*, now it is, for many learners, *authentic* and *real*.

As far as the teaching of culture is concerned, a parallel development has taken place, which reflects the expanding scope of cultural theory and the shift in educational aims. The knowledge-based content of traditional teaching (*savoir*, as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [CEFR]) labels it) has been extended to embrace the development of sociocultural competence: *savoir faire.* As in the case of the Communicative Approach, this development is, in essence, functionally motivated. Most recently, a recognition of the educational potential of the classroom vis-à-vis culture has again caused a shift of emphasis, this time towards the development of intercultural awareness and an understanding of otherness, i.e. of critically reflecting on one's own and other value systems and practices, of fostering plurilingualism and pluriculturalism (*savoir être*). Thus teachers are charged not only with transmitting knowledge and developing skills but also with providing a forum for critical reflection and dialogue.

It could be argued that this shift in parameters reflects a parallel path that has been trodden by linguists in their development of theoretical models. I shall consider these models with regard to three parameters of investigation referred to in the conference announcement: "the Self, the Other and the Environment". One assumption that most competing theories of language have in common is that language must be seen as a cognitive phenomenon. To quote Chomsky (1965: 4), "linguistic theory is mentalistic, since it is concerned with discovering a mental reality underlying actual behaviour". Where theories differ, however, is in how the nature of this mental reality is conceived and how the term 'cognitive' is interpreted. Chomsky's initially narrow view of mental reality focused on grammatical competence, to the exclusion of other aspects of communication. Not only did he take a syntactocentric (Jackendoff, 2002: 197), code-based view of competence, as in traditional language

teaching, but his theory of mental reality did not extend beyond the acquisition of grammar by an individual. Thus his reality was the solipsistic reality of the *self*.

As is well documented, Hymes was one of several linguists who subsequently challenged this view and, by introducing the term 'communicative competence' (1972), expanded the scope of linguistics to incorporate a socio-cultural, ethnographic perspective. In doing so, a speaker's mental reality came to be seen not only as an expression of self, but as a social reality which incorporated the *environment.* This view of social reality was at the heart of Communicative Language Teaching. Most recently, cognitive theories of language – Halliday and Matthiessen (1999), Jackendoff (2002), Langacker (1987) – have been proposed which reject the modular view of language and the concept of universal grammar proposed by Chomsky. These seek to describe language as a sub-system of human intelligence in general, rather than as an autonomous linguistic system. These views, which are, by their very definition, constructivist in nature, seek to embed communicative and cultural competence within what can be termed a more general 'cognitive competence' (Newby, in press). As such, all three elements of the aforementioned triad receive attention: the *self*, the *other* and the *environment*. It is significant that the turn of the century has seen the publication of a growing number of books which propose a cognitive linguistic model as the basis of theories of second language acquisition: Achard and Niemeier (2004); Holme (2009); Littlemore (2009); Robinson and Ellis (2008).

A further, and intriguing, concept discussed at the conference, which has considerable implications for language learning and teaching, concerns what Joëlle Aden refers to in the conference introduction as "*des espaces entre les univers de croyance*". She illustrates this concept with reference to the reflections of the painter Georges Braque, who, when creating a still life of an apple on a plate, stated: "*Ce qui est entre la pomme et l'assiette se peint aussi. Et ma foi, il me paraît tout aussi difficile de peindre l'entre-deux que les choses.*" I am also reminded here of an anecdote related by Matthew Arnold about the novelist Mary Shelley. Having sought advice from an acquaintance concerning the choice of school for her son, she was advised to choose "somewhere where they will teach him to think for himself". Upon hearing this, she replied: "Teach him to think for himself? Oh, my God, teach him rather to think like other people." (*Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 1953: 491). This comment, made nearly 200 years ago, shows a remarkable similarity with the notion of "*univers de croyance*", which Joëlle Aden defined as "*des espaces imaginaires qui se constituent en systèmes normatifs de valeurs*". Both of these statements reflect what I have

elsewhere termed the constructivist paradox: the apparent, though not actual, contradiction between linguistic and cognitive systematicity and personal construction.

At the risk of overgeneralising, I think it can be said that, in the past, the focus of much of language teaching, and also of certain areas of linguistic theory, has been on systemic aspects of language. One of the theoretically appealing aspects of Cognitive Linguistics is the idea that language description has the potential to incorporate both system and construction. For many language teachers, however, the constructivist paradox may represent something of a dilemma. In the past, they have seen it as their responsibility to convey the systematicity of language or the commonness of cultural beliefs and practices shared by a speech or cultural community. In other words, the apple and the plate of Georges Braque, or the capacity "to think like other people" of Mary Shelley. The "*entre-deux*", "thinking for oneself" aspect of language has been applied to the skill of using language, rather than to constructivist aspects of the language system itself. Yet even this systematicity is embedded within cultural and personal constructs of associations and schematic knowledge, which are part of an individual's mental lexicon. While a dictionary may define what the words "apple" and "plate" denote, it cannot convey what an apple meant within the mental lexicon of Eve, or of William Tell or of Snow White, or a plate within the mental lexicon of Oliver Twist.

The papers presented in this volume draw on a range of what might appear to be, at first sight, disparate theoretical disciplines: linguistics, cognitive and social sciences, neuroscience and so on. For researchers, the interrelatedness of these theories and the resulting need to expand their scope of academic interest may represent something of a challenge. However, let us not forget how in recent decades corresponding developments in language pedagogy have impacted classroom teachers. The following are just a few of the innovative trends which modern teachers might be expected to implement:

- information and communications technology (ICT), which has developed rapidly and continuously;
- a shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred views of language education, with an increased emphasis on autonomous learning;
- the publication by the Council of Europe (2001) of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), which, amongst many other things, required teachers to see aims and objectives not only in terms of what they teach (that is to say, their input), but in terms of learner competences (that is to say, the expected outcomes of language learning);

- the redefinition of the nature and goals of teaching culture;
- the concept of 'linguistic diversity' and the goals of promoting what the CEFR refers to as plurilingualism;
- cognitive theories of language, which have the potential to bring new directions in teaching vocabulary and grammar;
- cognitive theories of language acquisition, with their greater emphasis on cognitive learning processes, learning styles and strategies.

These innovations not only represent a quantitative challenge for teachers. They also require teachers to rethink what are well-established pedagogical practices and step outside the safe haven provided by immutable and, until recently, unchallenged shibboleths: grammar rules and exercises of mathematical, rather than communicative, character, watertight definitions of lexis, stereotypical "facts" about culture which can be put on a pedestal and observed from afar but which do not impinge on the teachers' or learners' own identities or beliefs.

An important question, both for researchers and for teachers, is whether a unified paradigm exists which will provide a coherent rationale within which new insights can be embedded. It seems to me that underlying all the above-mentioned innovations, and underpinning the central concepts of the conference – such as "*univers de croyance*" – is a cognitive-constructivist view of language and culture. This is also the pivotal theory through which the question of interrelatedness – *la reliance* – can best be approached. As far as language learning is concerned, if teachers are to understand and identify with the principles and goals of innovations, an important first step would be to ensure that both student teachers and practising educators have access to, and the opportunity to engage with, general principles of Cognitive Theory. This may, in turn, contribute to overcoming the "asymmetries" found in language education. It may help to create learning environments in which, rather than consuming and understanding new input, learners engage with it and interpret it. By the same token, the role of the teacher may be seen not only as the transmission of knowledge, as in traditional teaching, or the facilitation of learning, as in the Communicative Approach, but as the empowerment of learners so that they may explore the socio-cultural realities with which they are confronted.

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