

Peter Doughty

## Language for Living

### A principled approach to teaching mother tongue<sup>1</sup>

*Probably the chief obstacle to plain sailing in English classrooms in these days is the inconsistency of principle manifest in the daily practice of many teachers. Peter Doughty points to the failure to recognize the fundamental differences between the language used every day for life and the specialized school variety that he calls "language for learning" as the cause of most of the confusion and consequent failure to achieve any real results with teaching. His frequent references to Language for Use, that landmark text of which he was co-author (that is not so widely used in Canada as it might be) are justified by its universally acknowledged and outstanding practicality. But without a grasp of certain principles of action, he is saying, no text is enough.*

When *Language in Use*<sup>2</sup> was designed and written, nearly ten years ago, it gave concrete expression to three things: the certainty that there must be a shift in emphasis, within the teaching of English, towards a more active and coherent concern with mother tongue teaching; that this shift derives its justification from a properly linguistic perspective on language and language learning; and that this perspective ought to inform the necessary changes in attitude and practice. And yet, for all the obviousness of the need, and the great effort expended in the years since, it is clear that there are many teachers of English, and many advisers, inspectors, and other figures in the educational world, Ministers not least, who remain untouched by all that has been said.

Far be it from me to suppose that one more paper on the question of teaching mother tongue will achieve what so much else has failed to do. Nevertheless, it seemed opportune to try to restate, as succinctly as possible, the principled basis upon which any effective pedagogy of mother tongue teaching must rest. It has to be read against a situation in which so many teachers in this country,\* and in Australia, seem willing to abandon all the hard-won gains and revert

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\*Peter Doughty is writing from the context of teaching in England.

to a traditional approach, ostensibly prompted by a concern for standards, and urged on by a public debate that is as linguistically uninformed as it is polemically assertive of the rectitude of its own position.

If this seems an extreme statement, I would point to the prevalence of the class course book of the unreformed variety, and the degree to which the course book is accepted as an accredited 'subject content' for English Language. Pupils are marched through the scheduled exercises in the fond hope that this will "do something about declining standards," and when this has the predictable minimal effect, the pupils themselves are blamed for their inability to use their own language in ways which would satisfy their teachers' notions of "good English." That there could be anything seriously wrong with the pedagogy involved, that there is any intrinsic difference between teaching a subject content and teaching mother tongue, is dismissed as so much unintelligible theory and impractical moonshine. So 'grammar', 'punctuation', 'spelling', 'vocabulary', 'sentences', 'comprehension', are kept up virtually unmodified, in school after school; and the pupils' failure to develop the desired competence in mother tongue is laid at the door of the woolly-minded progressives who are supposed to infest the school system, especially at the early stages.

### **A non-natural language, for learning**

In this paper, I want to approach the whole question of teaching mother tongue from the direction of what I call "language for living," that is, the way in which human beings use language to keep up the business of being human, of sustaining a life in the world. This is the mode of language use we can call "natural." Opposed to it is the mode of use which dominates the formal educational context, "language for learning." This mode is expressly concerned with the explicit transmission of a formal knowledge content *as an end in itself*, and is thus non-natural, for this is not something we do in the free situation of our engagement with the world, the situation in which we learn language initially and keep it up.

I do not want to go into the question of "language for learning" in any great detail, but the following four points will help to characterize the concept for the purposes of this paper:

1. It is primarily concerned with mediating specific quanta of information (elements of subject content); thus it foregrounds logico-rational forms, as opposed to affective-expressive forms, through its preoccupation with cognitive operations of an analytical-abstractive order.
2. It puts a particular premium on explicitness of statement (that is, it insists upon the text conveying *all and only what is the case*, as opposed to language use in free situations, where utterances possess a penumbra of unrealized, implicit meanings).

3. It takes as its basic model of language use the impersonal, written mode, and uses this as a criterion for assessing the effectiveness of all language use.
4. The pupils' use of it is invariably also a *test that some knowledge content has been received* (producing the appropriate linguistic form is a sign that something has "been done;" more generally and disastrously, that someone is, or is not, "able" or "intelligent").

So we have a basic opposition between a natural "language for living" and a non-natural "language for learning," an opposition which becomes acute when the mother tongue itself is a candidate for subject status, as a teachable content within the frame of formal learning, and is thereby exposed to the values codified in the curriculum and in the practice it recommends.<sup>3</sup> Thus mother tongue teaching is always open to the insidious effects of a system in which what is teachable is an objectified knowledge content, what is learnable is what can be tested by being offered back as such a content. It is my chief concern in this paper, therefore, to suggest good reasons why any approach in 'English' that treats mother tongue as a knowledge content, in these terms, is certain to end up totally at variance with the declared aims of mother tongue teaching, the development of pupils' competence in writing and speaking.

### Language a biological property of the species

The broad concept of "language for living," I suggest, can yield us a clear set of principles upon which we might base an adequate pedagogy for mother tongue teaching, because we can draw from it a coherent theory of language, language learning, and language use which will lead us from the most general principles to the most particular practice. It is a theory that sets both learning and use in their primal context, the survival of a species in its natural habitat. As Professor Halliday once pointed out, the most deadly weapon one could invent would be a "degrammatization ray." It would make language function impossible, and thus destroy man's power to know himself and sustain his world, his society, and the culture that gives it meaning.

We can set out the terms of the theory in four basic principles:

1. That language is a biological property of the species, the learning of which is thus a function of innate genetic program.<sup>4</sup>
2. That it achieved this status in intimate connection with man's function as a problem-solving animal.
3. That it is thus the primary 'means by which' man creates for himself his own environment of family, community, society, and culture.
4. That it is thus the primary 'means by which' we create for ourselves, individually, *an identity we know to be ours*.

Propositions of this level of generality may seem a very long way from the actualities of the classroom, but it is not difficult to suggest immediate implications of each which bear directly upon the problems and practice of teaching mother tongue.

Given that language is not so much an acquired skill as a natural propensity, and that human beings learn how to learn language intuitively in interaction with other human beings,<sup>5</sup> our approach to teaching mother tongue must take account of the fact. Our colleagues in Physical Education and Music do not teach how to run, or teach how to sing: they develop, shape, give positive and local direction to, the capabilities of running, of singing, possessed by all well-formed human beings. In the field of mother tongue, however, too often we ignore the fact that the pupil, as a person, *has* learnt how to learn new ways of using language, and is continuing to do so successfully moreover outside the context of the classroom, and even sometimes inside it.<sup>6</sup> This is not to question that there are things to learn, especially things to learn about using “language for learning,” but to point to the fact that much of our pedagogy is misconceived because it leaves out of account the well-formed human being’s capacity to learn language as a function of his basic equipment for living. To do justice to this first principle, therefore, we must exploit rather than ignore the enormous potential contained in this intuitive capacity. It is fair to suggest, I think, that the units of *Language in Use* do make a beginning in this direction.

Those units offer also a concrete and particular embodiment of the principle that we learn language most effectively when the learning process itself is one parameter of the context in which we are attempting to solve a problem. By this, I do not mean a unit task conceived of purely in logico-rational terms, but a heuristic process which moves us from a ‘state of confusion’ to a ‘state of order’. Professor Halliday’s analysis of Nigel’s proto-language illustrates how fundamental an inter-relation there is between such problem-solving and the setting up of the core elements of the language system. It is as if language is a catalyst which has the power to transform the ‘state of confusion’ into the relevant ‘state of order’.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of an effective mother tongue pedagogy, what this requires us to do is to create ‘states of confusion’, that is, real dilemmas, real problems, that will engage the interest and attention of pupils. But that is not enough, of itself. There has to be also a genuine understanding of the ‘struggle with meaning’, a genuine willingness to tolerate the process of trial and error by which pupils find a form of words out of their own resources which will adequately express the ‘state of order’ that meets the needs of the case. This means a willingness to tolerate much written text that is first draft, that does not necessarily conform exactly to the conventions of the orthography — any more than the early draft of this paper did, or do the working notes any one of us makes as part of the normal process of study.

That this tolerance of trial and error in linguistic activity which is generated by the effort to discover a satisfactory 'state of order' is not a ridiculous ideal can be seen by studying the work of any good teacher of the Infant Reception class. Much of the school day, from News Time to Story Time, is taken up by a succession of such 'states of confusion' transformed into 'states of order' through a patient and tactful encouragement of the child's linguistic efforts. What is true and effective for the five-year-old remains true and effective for the fifteen-year-old, a direct implication of our first and second principles taken together.

### **The primary means by which**

If we turn to our third principle, it is here we can reconnect most directly with the idea of "language for living."<sup>8</sup> There is a quotation of Malinowski's I use very frequently in my own teaching of college students, because it characterizes as succinctly and memorably as possible the critical dimension of the free situation in which the well-formed mother tongue speaker operates:

Language functions as a link in concerted human activity, as a piece of human behaviour.

It reminds us forcibly that language, in a free situation, is never an end in itself, but always a 'means by which', something which causes things to happen. Nothing is more demonstrative of the naive view of language enshrined in the common culture than the idea that actions speak louder than words, for words are actions, are themselves behaviour, involved inextricably in patterns of "concerted human activity."

We live our lives within a series of networks of relationship, intimate, personal, public — networks the nodes of which are the individuals concerned, the lines of the mesh the linguistic links by means of which whatever concerted human activity is in question may be kept up. And we know that a great deal more than mere quanta of information pass over these lines in the process. The networks encode the values, attitudes, and assumptions which constitute the meaning universe within which we move as individuals.<sup>9</sup> We keep up the business of being human in and through such universes of meaning, to which we contribute and from which we draw when we seek to make meaningful to ourselves, and to others, our own experience of the world. Professor Halliday calls the process of *learning* language "learning how to mean"; we might say that *using* language was a continuous heuristic performed upon our experience of the world, a continuous learning how to make the world meaningful to us, in and through the language we speak.

When we consider the implications of this for the teaching of mother tongue, perhaps it is easiest to see, first, what it does not mean, and that is a "socially relevant" revamping of the subject matter of the English course book, or an insistence upon 'Communications English'. Acknowledging the social and

cultural dimensions of language function has much more to do with that “continuous learning how to make the world meaningful” than merely the complexities of official forms or the formulae of public correspondence. Just as our colleagues in Physical Education, Music, Painting and Craftwork cannot forward their work without real situations, so we have to create such real situations for the heuristic function of language. It is here, I believe, that we can find the firmest principled basis for current practice in the use of theme and topic, the use of the project, the use of field visits of all kinds, and the provision of direct novel experience in the classroom in terms of sight, sound and touch. These activities are not ways of evading the challenge of literacy, as their critics in this country have been eager to suggest, but vital means towards creating for the pupil situations in the classroom in which he can function freely as an effective practitioner of his own language.

### **The most intimate of private possessions**

But language is not only a public property, the medium of exchange that links us all in those patterns of “concerted human activity” without which there would be no human society, and thus no specifically human existence. It is also the most intimate of private possessions. Let me complement my quotation from Malinowski with one from Sartre:

The circularity of: to speak I must know my thoughts, but how am I to fix my thoughts except in words? is the form of all human reality.

These words remind us that there is yet a fourth proposition, perhaps the most vital of all for our attitude to the pupil as a mother tongue speaker. When we follow with Halliday the infant Nigel’s progress from babble through Proto-language and Early Language to possession of the form of the adult language, we follow also the progress of an identity in the making, not yet reflexive, but potentially so. As we learn how to deploy our knowledge of a language, we discover meaning in the world, and we learn to articulate our sense that we exist as a discrete entity.

So what does this last principle imply for mother tongue teaching? Firstly, that when you tread upon a pupil’s language you tread upon his soul. To defame, abuse, denigrate, or devalue a pupil’s language is to commit an unpardonable offence. Whatever you may believe to be its limitations, its defects, it is that by which he sustains his being in the world, creates for himself his imperishable sense of his own identity. Unless we accept that as a datum, and develop a pedagogy that does full justice to its import, our attempts at developing pupils’ competence are certain to remain as little effective as they have been.

It is not in question that we need to comment upon what pupils say, what they write. Of course, we wish them to be able to use the language they have more flexibly, more surely and confidently, in many ways they cannot necessari-

ly work out for themselves, and in many ways the world they live in does not recommend to them. But this development can only come through the prior acceptance of what they do, and the clearly expressed willingness to believe they can do the more than might at first appear, rather than the less than nothing teachers habitually anticipate. Again, the units of *Language in Use* show how this principle can be embodied in schemes of work that are severely practical.

At the same time, it is from this principle that we can derive the firmest basis for insisting pupils be encouraged to write intimately and personally, out of their own direct experience of the world. And by this the last thing I mean is the travesty of personal language use that many teachers accept as 'creative writing'. If we see all language use as a process of making meanings to fit the world, then all use of language is creative. To hive off expressive and personal ways of making meaning, as many teachers do, cannot but fragment the pupil's power to work upon the world through bringing language of his own choosing to bear upon it.

Perhaps we can best sum up what I have said about "language for living" by thus focusing upon the pupil himself. In the perspective of this theory of language learning and using, he appears as an innately competent languaging animal, who has learnt, and learnt to use, his language in the free situations of his natural habitat, the family, community and society, in which he grows up. He comes to us thus possessing a repertoire of strategies for learning and using language, which he operates, intuitively and successfully, in the normal course of surviving as a human being in a human environment.

Thus no pupil is ignorant of the subject matter, where mother tongue is concerned. No pupil who is well-formed "has no language," as an Infant Headmistress once tried to tell me. He does not need to be taught what he can best learn for himself. He possesses a powerful functional competence, so long as he finds himself in a free situation. And if someone is saying to himself "What about the teaching of the writing system?", I would remind him that what is involved in primary literacy is *not* the teaching of language, but the teaching of an alternative medium for the deployment of the knowledge of language the child already possesses.

## **A conflict of languages**

So the problem for the teacher of mother tongue is how to elicit that repertoire of strategies, learnt in the free situation of natural human society, when he has to work in an environment dominated by "language for learning" and the non-natural process of the explicit transmission of knowledge as an end in itself.

The limits upon the language learning of the vast majority of pupils are neither a function of inadequate innate ability, nor acquired intellectual dexterity, but a result of institutional habits — attitudes to language and its use,

assumptions about what and how mother tongue ought to be taught — which effectively preclude the possibility of our pupils learning language as they are competently accustomed to do. It is as if our Physical Education colleagues were to shackle the legs of pupils, put them in sacks, blind-fold them, and then accuse them of being unable to run. In the average course book ‘elements and vocabulary’ frame, a pupil is as free to function as an innately competent languaging animal as he would be to sing were his mouth sealed with Sellotape.

To the challenge that, true as all this might be, the practicalities of translating it into classroom strategies capable of being articulated by the average teacher are insuperable, I would answer that that is not the problem that is most daunting. As I have suggested, the units of *Language in Use* provide one very practical model, as do the packs of the *Working with Language* series.<sup>10</sup> What is much more difficult to discover is how to persuade teachers of mother tongue that such an approach is *obligatory*, whatever particular material is favoured, if the objectives of teaching mother tongue are to be anything better than reiterated platitudes.

Perhaps therefore, I should end with as brief a statement as possible of what such a change of attitude among teachers must embrace:

1. The suspension of disbelief in pupils’ native language capacity, and a willingness to discover what they can do, given as close an approximation to free situations of speaking and writing as possible.
2. The willingness to accept (a) pupils’ use of talk to explore new meanings, to generate a true language learning heuristic; and (b) pupils’ use of language of their own choosing in much of the written text they are asked to produce.
3. The refusal to use ways of working with language that turn the substance of “language for living” into a subject content which must then be handled in terms of a variety of “language for learning.”
4. The understanding that new ways of using language, the making of new meanings, in and through language, (a) take time to develop; (b) are initially tentative in form; (c) need space in which to be practised; (d) are never learnt before they are used. That is, we must accept imperfect performance as a crucial part of the process of mother tongue learning.

How we might bring teachers to accept a pedagogy that would incorporate these basic principles is matter for another paper. That we must do so, if we are to turn insight into effective practice, is the measure of our task.



**NOTES**

1. I am aware that I am writing for an audience that includes teachers of both English and French as mother tongues. On a few occasions, the context suggests 'teacher of English' rather than teacher of mother tongue, because I do not know whether or not the things I mention are true also for mother tongue teachers of French.
2. Peter Doughty, John Pearce, and Geoffrey Thornton, *Language in Use* (London: Edward Arnold, 1971).
3. Cf. Basil Bernstein, "On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge," in *Knowledge and Control*, ed. Michael F. D. Young (London: Collier-MacMillan, 1971).
4. A very accessible account of the biological basis can be found in Roger Gurney, *Language, Brain and Interactive Process* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973).
5. On language learning, I have been much influenced by Michael Halliday, *Learning How to Mean: Explorations in the Development of Language* (London: Edward Arnold, 1975).
6. On children and teen-agers as 'language practitioners', see essays in Sinclair Rogers, ed., *They Don't Speak Our Language* (London: Edward Arnold, 1976).
7. 'State of confusion' into 'state of order' relates to the basic biological concept of homeostatic action in man. Cf. J. Z. Young, *An Introduction to the Study of Man* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).
8. The interrelation between the first three propositions is developed more fully in Anne and Peter Doughty, *Language and Community* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974). See also Doughty, Thornton, and Doughty, *Language Study, the School and The Community* (New York: Elsevier, 1977).
9. Cf. M. A. K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978).
10. Published by Edward Arnold over the last six years, and edited by myself and Geoffrey Thornton, these show how one can find materials to simulate 'real situations of use'.