Chapter 1

INADEQUATE CATEGORIES

This is a thesis in the area of discourse theory. It specifically deals with a central theme in this area: the units of discourse analysis. Its purpose is to distinguish one such unit from the others and, in the process of doing so, clarify the others.

This chapter introduces the whole thesis. It stresses the importance of discourse analysis in language teaching. It also presents the justification for undertaking a study on discourse units: analysis is valid only to the extent that identification is reliable. And it outlines the stucture and content of the dissertation.

The chapter can also be regarded as the first one in a series of three, which discuss validity problems in important research. They reveal that analyses often compare entities which are not commensurable. Thus, they show a better understanding of the nature of such entities is needed, and indicate the main issues that have to be solved. In this way, they delimit the subject matter of the following chapters, which are grouped in another two parts.

Discourse analysis and language teaching

Discourse analysis had a leading role in a revolution that gave birth to ways of teaching that emphasize communication[1], and which today encompass most English as a foreign language operations. In the early and mid 1970s, together with error analysis[2], it actually caused a rejection of approaches and methods that concentrated on the repetition of isolated phrases or sentences representing grammatical patterns. And, since then, it has promoted innovation, by indicating new territories to enter and new elements with which to operate.

The point of discourse analysis is to recognize in language levels of organization different from grammar. For a discourse analyst, in applied linguistics, knowing a language is not only being able to compose grammatically correct sentences. It is, above all, being able to use the language. Being able to use it to say that this is so, that that is such and such. And being able to use it to invite, insult, protest, request, forgive... to perform acts. Being proficient is being able to say and being able to act.

Discourse analysis, thus, requires basic units of analysis different from the sentence. Actually, two such units have been used, sometimes besides the sentence and sometimes instead of the sentence: the proposition and the illocutionary act, which correspond to the saying and acting referred to above.

A fourth unit

I claim that a fourth unit is needed. I call it 'dissertation act'. It seems to me one must distinguish sharply between illocution and dissertation. Ordering, requesting, inviting – these are illocutionary acts. Asserting, hypothesizing and formulating a question are dissertation acts. Definition, classification, generalization and so on are kinds of assertions, that is to say, dissertation acts.

The proposal being made is that dissertation acts are not subtypes of illocutionary acts, as has been considered in philosophy and in applied linguistics. Rather, they constitute a category at the same hierarchical level.

Discussing the above proposal will involve reviewing the approaches that were followed originally to establish the proposition and the illocutionary act, as units distinct from the sentence. It will, too, imply revising the elements that are used to define acts and the kinds of relationships that are postulated between units in the same category and among units belonging to different categories. And, of course, it will also require a consideration of problems in the area that have been raised by other researchers, which include some related to the validity of the very idea of illocutionary act.

Reappraisal: a need

What is the justification for an applied linguist's devoting his work to such theoretical issues? An answer to those questions has already been hinted at: the issues concern matters which have been central to the language teacher's thinking about language for the past twenty years; it is reasonable to expect that improvements in our views about these matters will have important consequences for our teaching. If, for example, it is shown, as I intend to do in the second part of this thesis, that sentences, propositions and acts are relatively autonomous among themselves, then the case for presenting the student with and engaging her in language where the different kinds of units are at interplay will be strengthened. In terms which are perhaps simpler for those in the field, the necessity of authentic language will be underlined; it will be shown that it is logically impossible for someone to fully grasp what a sentence is if the relationships which it has with the proposition and the act that normally accompany it are eliminated. By the same token, the warning – by Widdowson (1990) – not to equate second language acquisition with the acquisition of a second grammar will be supported. At the same time, however, the reasons that have led teachers to isolate the units at certain points will become evident. In other words, the consideration of a sentence in its own terms, a legacy of old methods which has persisted in actual practice, in spite of its having been rejected in theory, will cease to be justified only on the wisdom of eclecticism and will become a principled activity. That is, a combination of ways of teaching that emphasize communication and ways that focus on grammar will be suggested in a coherent manner. But the suggestion will also include foci on propositions and acts.

In brief, from the theoretical reflection possible further steps in the direction of our present approaches and possible corrections to them will emerge. There is another answer, which focuses more on the present and less on the future. It is perhaps a little more specific, too. Propositions and illocutionary acts seem to be widely used, both implicitly and explicitly, in activities that condition (and are often part of) language teaching operations, such as the design of courses and materials. However, their potential remains underexploited, and decisions are frequently based solely on the basis of practical considerations. So, for example, when a programme is being devised, only those acts that can be named with ordinary words are included; in fact, as has been pointed out (Flowerdew 1990), large

areas in the domain of acts are often ignored or treated inadequately. It would, indeed, seem that we need a comprehensive definition of the illocutionary act. I believe we do not yet have one because we have not delimited its nature, and that distinguishing the dissertation act from it, will allow us to do so.

The problem of clarity: the case of writing studies

The underexploitation of the basic units is manifested in different ways in different areas of application. Let us take the evaluation of learners' writing as an example. Holistic assessment by experienced teachers is very often the most valid form of marking students' essays. In fact, this type of judgement must be the ultimate operational definition of text quality in educational settings, i.e. it must be the external referent in predictive validity studies of other measures. However, it is not always completely reliable, and sometimes it leads to two comparable pieces of work being assigned different grades by the same teacher. It would seem that the criteria that underlie the assessment are not applied consistently. Another problem in this area is that, for certain purposes, *eg* certification, it may be necessary to ensure equivalence of markings by various teachers, which the subjective nature of the evaluation does not guarantee. For these reasons, as well as for others concerning the diagnosis of student difficulties and the judging of large numbers of essays, it is desirable to make the underlying criteria explicit or, perhaps even more so, in order to achieve both validity and reliability, to define systematic marking procedures which correlate highly with holistic measures. Although it could be argued that such goals had not been perceived very neatly in the field of foreign languages until relatively recent years[3], and not been formulated succinctly before Péry-Woodley did so in a review article published in 1991, it is also possible to show that, at least since the early 1970s there have been discussions in this direction (see *eg* Hunt 1970).

In spite of the time that has elapsed, the results are not very satisfactory. To see why, let us recall that, inspired by apparently successful work in mother tongue studies (such as O'Hare 1973 and Combs 1977), there was, during a first period, an attempt to characterize good writing in terms of syntactic complexity. This, of course, faced the problem that sometimes simple writing is good writing (Coombs 1986). Looking at the matter from a discourse analysis point of view, we can say that the analyses those studies depended on, in fact, disregarded what

students said and the acts they performed, and, therefore, could not reflect the overall organization of a text and, in turn, could not correspond to any holistic assessments. In other words, there was a lack of correspondence between the aim of the research and the conceptual scheme that served as the basis for analyzing the data.

Although more recent research does not exhibit such gross mismatches between purpose and perspective, they are not completely free from the problem. Péry-Woodley, who thinks that now "the elaboration of a coherent framework and of relevant analytical tools is an essential task", takes propositional relations as the manifestation of act structure (1991:78). As will be shown in other chapters (mainly those of part II), according to the philosophical investigations that gave origin to the notions of proposition and act, their association cannot be that of one manifesting the other; it follows from this that neither could relations in the domain of one be an epiphenomenon of structures in that of the other. We see that even someone who is aware of the effect of conceptual confusions on the analysis, entangles the fundamental concepts in the area. This would seem to indicate a need to review the creation of the notions and their establishment in the field of applied linguistics, referring in particular to relations.

The problem of comparability: the case of conversation studies

Another area of application is the study of conversations in which learners participate. In the late 1970s, E. Hatch claimed that syntax develops out of conversation (Hatch 1978a, Hatch 1978b). This lead to various works on how learners talk among themselves (*eg* Scarcella and Higa 1981), how teachers talk to them (*eg* Long and Sato 1983) and how they talk with teachers (*eg* Ellis 1984) and with other people outside the classroom (*eg* Long 1983). Among other results, these works show how an incipient syntactic construction by a learner can be completed by her interlocutor and then be retaken by her, sometimes to expand it further, thus the final horizontal construction being, as it were, the product of vertical building.

Let us borrow a recent summary of the main hypotheses in this area in order to complement the view of how grammar can grow from conversation. De Fina *et al* (1992:14-5) say that, in a conversation where learners take part, linguistic and

interactional modifications will occur, and that these will: a) allow them to understand what is said, b) provide feedback on their own linguistic production, c) offer them opportunities to modify their developing grammatical system, and d) direct their attention to new grammatical patterns which they will later internalize.

It might be convenient to extend this line of thinking a little. What happens when somebody attempts to communicate in another language could conduce to learning, but the wrong interactional conditions might be obstructive of learning. The logic that explains the first point can lead us to see the second one. If the learner is not allowed to interrupt his interlocutor, will he be able to take her utterances and build on them? If there are not enough links to his previous knowledge, will he understand what is being said? If there is no need to agree (or disagree) about what is being proposed, will he get sufficient feedback on his linguistic production? If he cannot afford to be wrong, will he really have opportunities to modify and develop his grammatical system? And if the content of the discourse is not interesting and demanding, will there be any reasons to pay attention to new grammatical patterns?

Research on conversation could obviously open exciting developments in teaching technique. It could, for instance, show us how it is convenient to focus on grammar or which forms of feedback are more effective. However, before detailed recommendations of these sorts could be really useful, they would have to be related to a global view of conversation dynamics, because the elements of conversation may take on different values depending on the conversation they are part of. It has been shown, for example, that modifications which sometimes seem to help the learner, such as those which occur when someone asks for a clarification, can also be an indication of a frustrating and pedagogically undesirable interaction (Aston 1986).

Looking at the matter from a complementary angle, we do not know when the identification of error, *ie* negative feedback, counts as an invitation to attempt a grammatical variation and when it closes the conversation. We do not know, either, when focusing on a grammatical pattern counts as a change of topic that precludes further clarifications about the original content of the conversation and when it is a simple interruption. In other words, we cannot tell how conditions assign value to elements in discourse.

Unfortunately, at this moment it is not easy to conceive the global view that we need to interpret discourse elements and to study the effect of various interventions in discourse. The bases to construct such a view are not very reliable. In the research literature, sometimes it is not even clear if what is being identified with similar names is one phenomenon, various phenomena of the same sort or very different phenomena. Pica (1987), for example, distinguishes finely between a clarification request and a confirmation check (although both are forms of asking the interlocutor to provide additional information that will ensure comprehension). By contrast, Ellis (1992) includes under requests a wide variety of acts which are often distinguished from these, such as orders.

Actually, researchers have compared and contrasted units which should belong in different taxonomical levels without being sufficiently aware of it. This can be illustrated by a recent review by Kasper and Merete (1991) of methods used in studies specifically concerned with speech acts performed by or addressed to non-native speakers of a language. Here, acts like the expression of an emotion or the provision of embarrassing information, are taken alongside requests and disapprovals. That is, very general categories, like requests, are assumed to be comparable to more specific categories, like the provision of a particular type of information.

What is also wrongly assumed to be comparable is the nature of the acts. That is, not only the levels, but also the branches of the taxonomy are confused. This is worrying. The founder of the philosophical school I referred to earlier, J.L. Austin, had already distinguished illocutionary acts (which have a social or civil effect) from acts that have a psychological effect – which he called "perlocutionary" acts. Moreover, he explicitly warned his readers not to define the former in terms of the latter (Austin 1962: 101-104). The point he was making is that illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts are unrelatable at the basic level of their definitions, although, of course, they interplay in discourse. In other words, perlocutionary acts are not (sub)types of illocutionary acts, as Kasper and Merete's comparison presupposes.

Fundamental character of problems

It could be replied that perhaps the only problem is that Kasper and Merete, or the authors they review, were not very careful at certain points. There are some

> ...no attempt will be made to follow any particular theory of discourse or to utilise any specific descriptive framework. Politzer (1980) has argued that for pedagogical purposes discourse analysis needs to be 'motivational' rather than 'structural' and that this requires a higher level of speculation than most discourse analysts encompass. In line with this view, the descriptions offered are eclectic, drawing on techniques from different approaches according to whatever seems best suited to throw light on the developmental process itself.
>
> (Ellis 1984: 101)

Unfortunately, although studies where theory has this role can be insightful – and Ellis's is insightful –, they cannot be replicated because their analyses of data cannot be corroborated:

> This framework is designed to provide a basis for discussion, *not to code* the interactions...
>
> (Ellis 1984: 102. My emphasis.)

If data are assigned to categories, but not coded as belonging in them, how does someone else, beside Ellis, know when some datum should be counted as what? In other words, if there are two different interpretations of the same data, one by Ellis and one by another person, how do we know if he or she made a simple mistake (that can be corrected) or if she is right and the enquiry is, in the first place, misguided? And, if the assignment of features of different types of interactions in the classroom is the basis for comparing and contrasting those types, as in Ellis's work, what do the comparisons mean?

Sometimes, conclusions can be granted by insuring comparability through experimental control. This is, for example, what Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1987) achieved by defining requests only in operational terms:

> We identify as a request sequence all the utterance(s) involved in the turn completing the dialogue in the DCT [Discourse-Completion Test]. For example:
> "Judith, I missed class yesterday, do you think I could borrow your notes? I promise to return them tomorrow."
>
> (p. 17)

The cost is high, though: a size issue is introduced. Sequences consisting of different numbers of acts will be considered as equal, and acts, properly, will not be recorded. In the example above, the promise which is part of the request sequence has been missed; and the whole sequence is taken as comparable to sequences without a promise.

There is another problem here. The control measure might interfere with what is being observed, and, in the words of Kasper and Merete (1991), it:

> ...might well preclude access to precisely the kinds of conversational and interpersonal phenomena that might shed light on the pragmatics of IL [interlanguage] use and development.
>
> (p. 245)

In other words, experimental control cannot substitute for theoretical clarity. If we are interested in the possibility of generalizing experimental results to real life, we must tell how experimental and real life conditions are related and, therefore, we must be able to study directly some real life discourse.

The points that have been made about writing evaluation research and conversational studies can be generalized to any other areas where discourse analysis is applied. The analyses can be relevant only to the extent that they are valid, and their validity depends on the quality of the systems of analysis employed. But the fact is that, at present, even rigorously developed systems, and no matter how carefully they are applied, yield inconsistent codings. They all introduce level, branch, or size problems. Moreover, there are always examples of utterances which express obviously similar sentences (or parts of sentences) and which have evidently similar intentions and results and are, yet, coded differently, as well as examples of utterances different in those respects which receive the same coding; instances of this mistake in Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) analysis, which were noted by Edmonson (1981: 68-69) will be commented in the next chapter. And even when an acceptable degree of reliability is achieved, this seems to be at the cost of limiting the range of application too much (Flowerdew 1990).

Inconsistency or inapplicability of seemingly good act-based systems has led several researchers to question the very point of using acts as units (see *eg* Brown and Yule 1983). A number of apparently insurmountable problems have been raised, such as establishing how many acts there are in a given subcategory (for a review of such problems, see Flowerdew 1990).

However, as will be shown in the third part of this thesis, the formulation itself of the questioning has been partly affected by the same confusions that underlie the problems. For example, in more than one occasion it has involved adducing, as negative evidence, a failure to recognize as illocutionary acts entities which do not at all belong in the category, such as perlocutionary acts (see above). So, the questioning is not really an argument to abandon the idea of acts, as might seem to be the case, but has to be taken as an argument in favour of clarifying the confusions.

Conclusion

In sum, useful pedagogical recommendations and evaluation schemes could be derived from discourse studies, if we had a global view of discourse dynamics that told us which elements counted as what when. But before we can conceive such a view, we require theoretical clarity about the units we employ to analyse discourse, in order to guarantee that observations be replicable by different researchers and comparisons be meaningful across different situations.

In particular, work on the nature and the defining elements of speech acts is needed. It ought to consider them *vis-a-vis* sentences and propositions and it ought to deal with relations among speech acts. That need is what justifies this thesis.

It can be added that it is not very likely that scholars in areas other than applied linguistics will do the work. Philosophers became interested in speech acts because they showed aspects of matters that were already important to them. Among these, we can mention the relationship between truth and meaning, which we will touch upon in the second part of the thesis. Other such matters (which we will only mention here) include willful rule governed behaviour and intentionality itself. Once speech act theory had made a contribution to the study

of these matters, it ceased being a major philosophical area. Furthermore, when aspects of it are reconsidered it is not with the type of aim we have, namely to produce valid, reliable, and useful schemes to study discourse empirically or design syllabi.

To take another example, linguists who study units larger than the sentence, led perhaps by an interest in co-reference, deal mainly with the propositional domain of discourse, and consider speech acts only marginally, without seeking a comprehensive and systematic account of them. The same can be said about scholars carrying out psychologically oriented studies on comprehension or production. On the other hand, social scientists (such as political sociologists) who have enriched their views with the notion of speech acts, do not regard the acts as units for detailed codings of discourse; rather, they use the notion in general discussions of properly sociological themes, such as the constitution of collective agents.

Structure of the thesis

The last comments indicate that a good strategy to begin the work we need to do could be to locate sources of difficulty in our field with more precision. This is the strategy I followed. I first identified problems in two research areas of applied linguistics: classroom interaction and specialized language.

The following two chapters, which, together with the present one constitute Part I of the thesis, are dedicated to those two areas. Chapter 2 considers the kinds of coding conventions required for classroom research and discusses the methodological decisions the researcher has to make. It shows the practical need for distinguishing utterances from sentences and these from propositions and acts, and it singles out one of the key problems in the area: determining how many acts can be performed simultaneously with one utterance.

Chapter 3 presents general issues in specialized language research, such as the use of everyday names as technical terms to identify the acts of argumentation and exposition. These issues are made manifest in the study of one particular act, definition. The discussion shows the need to distinguish acts from act relations and from act compounds, and it stresses that a central goal of theoreti-

cal research in the area is to establish the defining elements of acts. The view of discourse embodied in the proposals is projected to identify new areas of research, with foci on text constellations and delayed comprehension.

At certain points in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, the importance of the research problems for teaching practice is noted. For example, it is shown that the distinction between illocutionary and dissertation acts could be very useful in distinguishing ESP (English for Specific Purposes) from general English courses in terms of discourse objectives. At the level of more basic pedagogical decisions, it is argued that the systematic view of acts advocated will allow us to properly define the target communicative competence of a course (as opposed to merely listing final performance repertoires for it).

At the end of these two chapters, I claim that the problems identified there can only be solved if the distinction between illocutionary acts and dissertation acts is well established first. Part II of the thesis, which consists of chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7, proves the two are indeed separate, basic types.

Chapter 4 simultaneously presents a summarized review of the approaches that have been followed to establish discourse analysis units and a synthesis of the arguments that distinguish dissertation from illocutionary acts following each approach. Chapter 5 is a detailed discussion of the arguments according to the first approach, the one Peter Strawson followed to distinguish the sentence from the proposition – and, later, John Searle used to distinguish the illocutionary act from both, the sentence and the proposition. Chapter 6 develops, also in a detailed fashion, the arguments according to the second approach, the one which allowed John Austin to present and explore the idea of illocutionary acts. And Chapter 7 follows the approach used by Henry Widdowson to introduce the idea in the field of applied linguistics.

At various moments, it is noted that the discussions of Part II relate to important notions for applied linguistics, such as the etic/emic distinction. It is also shown that their results could be incorporated into some of the common language teaching frames of reference, for example, in a distinction between situational and contextual language teaching. Their potential relevance to teaching practice is also indicated, *eg* as the basis of guidelines for devising classroom games.

Part III is devoted to implications and applications of the distinction and the arguments that establish it. It consists of three chapters. The first one, Chapter 8, concentrates on illocution, and depicts it as deontic intervention. It ends with one general definition of illocutionary acts which has the form of a formula that can be transformed into particular definitions of different acts, by substitution of its elements.

Chapter 9 concentrates on dissertation, and treats it as epistemic intervention. The elements of dissertation are represented in another definitional formula, which, like that for illocution, allows for a systematic and comprehensive coverage of particular acts.

These two chapters, 8 and 9, solve the two central, theoretical problems that were identified in chapters 2 and 3, and they answer the most important objections to speech act theory in the discourse analysis literature. They also note how the notions of illocution and dissertation developed here could be used in the classification of classroom activities and exercises.

Chapter 10 is devoted to research and design proposals which stem from the two general formulae of the previous chapters. It outlines an ambitious programme to study speech acts comprehensively and it shows how to overcome the kinds of validity problems and confusions that have been mentioned here, *eg* in relation to conversation analysis. It also presents three syllabus organization principles, that would allow us to make micro, intermediate and macro specifications, by concentrating, respectively, on speech act elements, speech acts, and speech act sequences. The chapter ends with an exposition of ideas on teaching methods and approaches, which derive from the syllabus design proposals and which take into account the several observations about teaching that were made throughout the thesis. Their aim is to improve communicative teaching and incorporate reflection into this type of methodology in a principled (rather than an *ad-hoc*) manner.

The epilogue contains some comments on the benefits theory and analysis have had here.

Chapter 1 notes

1. In broad terms, communicative language teaching defines situations in which the student has to use language in order to achieve goals (or pretended goals) which mirror those of participants in communicative exchanges outside the classroom. Activities in this kind of teaching typically include conversations where students adopt different situational roles, such as those of successful salesman, lost tourist, or angry wife. They often also include solving problems, cooperatively or competitively, by obtaining and providing information which in the beginning is distributed differentially. (Most of tje positions that initiated this comunicative approach are expressed in Brumfit and Johnson 1979.)

2. Error analysis aimed at accounting for students' systematic errors in terms of productive grammatical rules (Corder 1967) which constitute an 'aproximative' (Nemser 1971) or 'interlanguage' (Selinker 1972) system. As Pery-Woodly (1991) has put it, the importance of error analysis is that it presented the learner as an agent, rather than as a mere recepient of language learning.

3. Perhaps the first article which has the objective validation of holistic evaluation as its main concern, in the field of foreign languages, is Homburg 1984.