# Correctness and Appropriacy

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## ABSTRACT

*The article is an attempt to clarify certain issues that seem to me to arise from adopting a communicative approach to the teaching of language. I have in mind, in particular, the teaching of English to speakers of other languages. Over recent years I (and a number of others) have advocated such an approach in principle and have tried to put it into practice in the preparation of teaching materials. In principle and practice, however, there always seemed to be loose ends of one sort or another: inconsistencies, unexamined assumptions, unresolved difficulties. My aim in this article was to sort out some of the things that I had been saying, consider their implications more closely, and see if they might be ordered into a coherent account. I wanted to try to think things through.*

**KEYWORDS:** *aims, language, perform, learn, teaching, produce, respects.*

## Introduction

The aims of a language teaching course are very often defined with reference to the four "language skills": understanding speech, speaking, reading and writing. These aims, therefore, relate to the kind of activity which the learners are to perform. But how can we characterize this activity? What is it that learners are expected to understand, speak, read and write? The obvious answer is: the language they are learning. But what exactly do we mean by this? We might mean a selection of lexical items recorded in a dictionary combined with syntactic structures recorded in a grammar. In this view, the teaching of a language involves developing the ability to produce correct sentences. Many teachers would subscribe to this view and it has been productive of a good deal of impressive language teaching material. In some respects, however, it is unsatisfactory. We may readily acknowledge that the ability to produce sentences is a crucial one in the learning of a language. It is important to recognize, however, that it is not the only ability that learners need to acquire. Someone knowing a language knows more than how to understand, speak, read and write sentences. He also knows how sentences are used to communicative effect.

We may conveniently begin by considering an example of a correct English sentence:

The rain destroyed the crops.

Here we have a correct English sentence and we might wish to say that anybody speaking or writing such a sentence gives evidence of a good knowledge of the language. We would judge anybody producing the following sentences, on the other hand, to have an inadequate knowledge:

The rain is destroy the crops.

The rain destruct the crops.

But what would we say if someone produced our correct sentence in the following context?

(A approaches B, a stranger, in the street)

A: Could you tell me the way to the railway station, please?

B: The rain destroyed the crops.

The sentence remains correct, of course, but we might well hesitate to say that B had a good knowledge of English on this evidence. We would be inclined to say that he did not really know the language. It might be objected that nobody in his senses would ever seriously utter this sentence in response to the kind of question that A puts. But why not? The answer is that when we acquire a language we do not only learn how to compose and comprehend correct sentences as isolated linguistic units of random occurrence; we also learn how to use sentences appropriately to achieve a communicative purpose. We are not just walking grammars.

It might appear that the example I have given is somewhat extreme. Let us consider another:

A: What did the rain do?

B: The crops were destroyed by the rain.

This is a distinct improvement on the previous exchange, but as competent speakers of English we can recognize, nevertheless, that B's reply is still in some way the wrong kind of reply. It does not take on an appropriate form in this context. By the same token we recognize that the following are odd combinations of sentences:

A: What was destroyed by the rain?

B: The rain destroyed the crops.

A: What happened to the crops?

B: The rain destroyed the crops.

We also recognize that the following exchanges are quite normal:

A: What did the rain do?

B: It destroyed the crops.

A: What was destroyed by the crops?

B: The crops.

A: What happened to the crops?

B: They were destroyed by the rain.

Making an appropriate reply is a matter of selecting a sentence which will combine with the sentence used for asking the question. Or it may involve using only part of a sentence, as in the second of the normal exchanges given above.

The learning of a language, then, involves acquiring the ability to compose correct sentences. That is one aspect of the matter. But it also involves acquiring an understanding of which sentences, or parts of sentences are appropriate in a particular context. The first kind of ability depends upon a knowledge of the grammatical rules of the language being learned. We can demonstrate this knowledge by producing strings of sentences are appropriate in a particular context:

The rain destroyed the crops.

The cat sat on the mat.

The unicorn is a mythical beast.

Poor John ran away.

The farmer killed the duckling.

John loves Mary.

My tailor is rich.

To produce sentences like this is to manifest our knowledge of the language system of English. We will say that they are instances of correct English usage. But of course we are not commonly called upon simply to manifest our knowledge in this way in the normal circumstances of daily life. We are generally required to use our knowledge of the language system in order to achieve some kind of communicative purpose. That is to say, we are generally called upon to produce instances of language use: we do not simply manifest the abstract system of the language, we at the same time realize it as meaningful communicative behavior.

This distinction between usage and use is related to de Saussure's distinction between langue and parole and Chomsky's similar distinction between competence and performance. It is important to make clear what this distinction is. The notion of competence has to do with a language user's knowledge of abstract linguistic rules. This knowledge has to be put into effect as behavior, it has to be revealed through performance. When it is put into effect through the citation of sentences to illustrate these rules, as is done in grammar books, then performance yields instances of usage: abstract knowledge is manifested. When language teachers select structures and vocabulary for their courses they select those items of usage which they judge to be most effective for teaching the underlying rules of the language system. Usage, then, is one aspect of performance, than aspect which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules. Use is another aspect of performance: that which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication.

In normal circumstances, linguistic performance involves the simultaneous manifestation of the language system as usage and its realization as use. But we can separate one from the other if we wish by focusing our attention on one rather than the other. When we are engaged in conversation we do not as a rule take note of such usage phenomena as grammatical irregularities (which may be quite frequent) in the speech of the person we are talking to, unless they force themselves on our attention by impeding communication. Our concern is with use and this concern filters out such irregularities of usage. If we assume the role of linguists in search of data, on the other hand, we might well adjust our focus of attention and concentrate on our interlocutor's usage, take note of his hesitations and repetitions, the peculiarities of his pronunciation and so on. The terms we have in English for referring to performance reflect these two aspects of behavior. An expression like "She speaks indistinctly", for example, refers to usage and an expression like He speaks persuasively refers to use.

### Conclusion

In the discussion of use earlier in this article, it was pointed out that a sentence might be appropriate in a particular context by virtue of its form but still not be appropriate in function in a particular situation. The notion of appropriacy, then, was applied both to the form and the function of sentences as instances of use. The nature of the relationship between formal and functional appropriacy will be discussed in more detail in the article which follows.

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6. The most detailed treatment is to be found in W. F. Mackey: Language Teaching Analysis, Longman, 1965, pp.137 et seq.

7. The criteria discussed by Mackey are: frequency, range, availability, coverage, learnability. See also Chapters 29-31 of my Language Teaching Texts, Oxford University Press, 1971.