Linguistics at School

Linguistics is a subject that has remained largely confined to the academy, rather than being integrated into school curricula. This is unfortunate but not surprising as, although some teacher education programs include courses on linguistics, it is not comprehensively integrated into teacher education, so it is largely absent from the curriculum.

This volume brings together a team of leaders in the field of linguistics and education, to provide an overview of the current state of research and practice. It demonstrates changes which can be made to teaching, such as revising teachers' preparation, developing and implementing practical applications of linguistics in both primary and secondary classrooms, partnering linguists with classroom teachers, and working to improve state and national education standards. The contributors emphasize the importance of collaboration between professional linguists and educators in order to meet a common goal: to raise awareness of the workings of language.

The editors

KRISTIN DENHAM is Associate Professor of English and Linguistics at Western Washington University. Her work includes articles on theoretical syntax and linguistics in education and she is co-editor with Anne Lobeck of *Language in Schools: Integrating Linguistic Knowledge into K-12 Education* (2005). Denham and Lobeck are also co-authors of *Linguistics for Everyone: An Introduction* (2009).

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Language Awareness in Primary and Secondary Education

Edited by
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and
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Foreword: The challenge for education

Ray Jackendoff

A few years ago, my daughter received a Master's degree in Education from a prestigious and progressive program, and the school district in which she had interned hired her immediately to teach third grade. My pride in her notwithstanding, I was astonished to learn that her training had included nothing at all about the contemporary understanding of language: the structure of English, the systematicity of dialects, the cognitive challenges faced by beginning readers and English language learners, and the sociology of language prejudice – issues that from a linguist's point of view are central to all levels of K-12 education.

By virtue of having grown up with a linguist in the house, my daughter did indeed have some exposure to these issues. But typically, classroom teachers do not. The teaching of the structure of language as part of language arts was largely abandoned in the US twenty-five years ago, so many teachers do not even have a background from their own primary and secondary education, as they do in science and math. Rather, they are simply left to deal with language problems in their classrooms in terms of what they – and their administrators and their students' parents – take to be common sense.

As linguists constantly stress in their introductory courses, people's "common sense" about language is far from accurate. Moreover, it often stands in the way of effective education in speaking, understanding, reading, and writing mainstream English. In turn, command of mainstream English is essential not only for its own sake, but also for success in every other subject, from history to science and mathematics, as well as for success in later professional settings.

For many years, a few linguists here and there have concerned themselves with these issues, collaborating with classroom teachers to try to inject some of the science of language – and the joy of exploring language – into K-12 curricula. Most of these efforts have been rather isolated and small-scale. But in the last decade, a community of researchers has begun to coalesce around the Linguistics in the School Curriculum Committee of the Linguistic Society of America. Many of the same people are also active in the National Council of

Teachers of English, and for some years the two societies have sponsored successful joint symposia.

I am delighted to see in the present volume a cross-section of the exciting work being done in this community, as seen by linguists and also by the teacher educators and classroom teachers with whom they have collaborated.

Several important themes recur throughout the volume. Perhaps the most crucial is how essential it is to validate students' own languages and/or dialects. Many of the contributors stress that teaching mainstream English proves far more effective if the language can be viewed as a tool rather than a threat, intended to supplement rather than supplant students' customary linguistic practices. This change alone makes a major difference to students' growth in competence in the mainstream language, not to mention to their test scores.

Another striking theme is the value of learning about language by playing with it. Students love observing their language, experimenting with it, and comparing it systematically to other accents, other dialects, other languages, to language at home, in the street, in school, and in the media. Encouraging and capitalizing on such creative metalinguistic activity has benefits all across the spectrum, from reading and writing to critical thinking and problem solving.

Which leads to a third theme: The most natural application of linguistics is of course to language arts, where it helps underpin learning in speaking, reading, and writing. But it also can play a valuable role in social studies, where for instance the study of dialects can serve as a springboard for studying social stratification and the history of migration and settlement. Furthermore, the science of linguistics can serve as a low-tech example of empirical investigation and scientific theory-formation, in which students can find the data all around them, free for the picking.

Many of the projects discussed here are collaborations among a small group of linguists and teachers. The challenge they pose is how to extend their benefits to a larger cohort of students. There obviously can't be a linguist in every classroom. At least three tasks have to be addressed in tandem: winning broader public acceptance of these approaches to language teaching; creating self-standing classroom materials that teachers can use without the intervention of a partnering linguist; and finding ways to train teachers in the use of such materials, whether through schools of education, inservice workshops, or the internet. None of these three can really succeed without the others. Yet it can be done, as shown by the large-scale integrated language curricula in Great Britain and Australia, also presented in this volume.

An important key to these goals is getting teachers on board. On their own, linguists cannot develop K-12 curricula in language arts, social studies, and science. Teachers and teacher educators must be collaborators throughout the process. It will not be easy. Teachers often find they must overcome their own linguistic prejudices and insecurities. In addition, they face enormous pressures,

from parents, administrators, and even from state assessment requirements, to maintain the traditional approach to language study. But, as the chapters in this book show, with teachers and linguists working together, it is possible to shift language study to an approach informed by the science of natural language. Teachers who have learned to deal with language from this new perspective love it, and their students thrive.

All these issues came to the fore in a 2006 workshop on Linguistics in Education at Tufts University, co-hosted by the Center for Cognitive Studies and by Maryanne Wolf's Center for Reading and Language Research. The participants included many of the contributors to the present volume. The excitement generated by the workshop led to new collaborations and to a series of follow-up workshops organized by Anne Lobeck and Kristin Denham, some of whose fruits appear here.

The overall goal of these efforts, of course, is to benefit our children and our society through the better teaching of language. The publication of this book is an important step toward this goal. I hope readers will be inspired to join the effort.