Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 5
Issue 2 *Focus: Teaching Language*

Article 5

1989

Language Learning as Discovery

R. Chesla Sharp

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Sharp, R. Chesla (1989) "Language Learning as Discovery," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1677>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

LANGUAGE LEARNING AS DISCOVERY

R. Chesla Sharp

The call for papers for this issue of *LAJM* asked if language study could be made as interesting, dynamic, and rewarding as the study of literature and composition. As a linguist in a literature department, I have been asking that question for a long time. I think for some people the answer must be no. Literary study, at its best, has as its focus human beings and their reactions to their world. Readers of literature discover these reactions. Language study often has as its focus abstract grammatical concepts which are delivered to the students already well-formed, usually on the basis that the concepts are good for the student.

To make language study exciting to students, teachers must approach it as a matter of discovery and interpretation, much as they approach the teaching of literature. Students of literature are given various texts from which they form concepts about—and learn how to take pleasure in—the nature of literature. Language students should be given a body of material from which they form concepts about—and learn how to take pleasure in—the nature of language. This body of material may be any corpus that adequately reflects the nature of language—recordings of telephone conversations, materials prepared by the teacher, or a piece of literature.

To make the various elements of the English curriculum more united, language study should often (but not always) center on literary texts. The focus of the linguistic explication of the corpus should clearly be language, not just grammar, and the method of inquiry should be the students' discovery for themselves of the nature and functions of their language. If it is true that native speakers have internalized the grammar of their language, then with a little training in analysis they should be able to make some valid generalizations about that language. But before students can come to trust their generalizations, or even be brought to make generaliza-

tions, they must learn that language is an ordered system and that rules of grammar are descriptions of the order. Students instinctively know this order; from their earliest days as language-users, they learn to form sentences with the subject before the verb and the indirect object before the direct object.

But since much English instruction involves dialect shifting for some students, they may see the rules of English as capricious and nonbinding—such as “who” as subject and “whom” as object. Therefore, when given a linguistic corpus and asked to describe the modification structure, they will hesitate because they have not been told what the modification structure is. Yet when given a literary text and asked to describe the image pattern, they will at least respond with something. Students need to understand explicitly that there are both *regulative* and *constitutive* rules of English. Constitutive rules are inherent in the language and are binding on all forms of that language; they create a regular, ordered system: Adjectives come before nouns, prepositions come before their objects. Regulative rules are specific to standard English and across dialect lines do not appear to be regular; within standard English regulative rules are predictable: “Who” goes with people, “which” goes with things.

To give students an introductory understanding of this ordered system and some experience with making generalizations about it, I suggest a linguistic corpus of very limited data similar to ones often used in linguistic classes. Since I want a schematic arrangement, the artificial corpus is better than a literary text:

The three big houses
His two large yellow dogs
The red brick building
John's small screwdriver

The students may be asked to write a general description of the order in which modifiers are added to nouns so that a speaking robot could be programmed to speak well-formed English noun phrases. Obviously, the function of the exercise is to convince the student that very simple phrases in English are controlled by an order and that the order can be described by a native speaker of the language.

We might also put some ungrammatical phrases from the robot on the worksheet.

- (1) The John's Book
- (2) His yellow large dog
- (3) The brick red building

We can then ask the students what they would do to make each noun phrase a grammatical English phrase. The first noun phrase would be changed to "the book" or "John's book;" students could then generalize that articles and possessives cannot immediately follow each other. The second noun phrase would be changed to "his large yellow dog," and students could generalize that color words must follow size words in English.

After working through a few of these rewrites, students can then make a descriptive statement something like the following:

articles	numbers	adjective	adjective	noun
possessives		of size	of color	modifiers

The description may not be completely correct, but at the very least students will begin to understand that English "operates according to grammatical systems and patterns of usage"—the first objective listed for language study in the College Board's recommendation for academic preparation for college (Board 23). At best students may develop curiosity about the language and faith in their ability to analyze it.

I think it might be good in showing the regularity of the language to include one form of "nonstandard" English so students can see that all varieties of language are ordered. Students often assume that all English forms not taught in the classroom are deviations and are, therefore, not bound by rules. To illustrate regularity in a non-mainstream dialect, I suggest a teacher-prepared corpus showing a-prefixing in Appalachian English. The corpus used here is based on the work of Christian, Wolfram, and Dube:

A-prefixing occurs in the following:

- (1) He was a-beggin' and a-crying' and a-wantin' to come out.
- (2) I knew he was a-tellin' the truth, but still I was a-comin' home.

A-prefixing does not occur in the following:

- (3) He likes a-huntin'.
- (4) The ten a-livin' children are at home.
- (5) She was a-eatin' the food.
- (6) She was a-enterin' from her house. (51-58)

We want students to see the regularity of one feature in this non-prestige dialect. The predictable distribution may be brought out by the following questions:

- (1) In sentences 1 and 2, what part of speech is a added to?
- (2) What form is this part of speech in?
- (3) With what type of speech sound does this part of speech begin?
- (4) Taking the answers of the three previous questions, can you write out a statement which will describe where a-prefixing occurs in this dialect?
- (5) Do the statements about where a-prefixing does not occur confirm your predictive statement?

After the students have had some experience with discovering and describing the regularity of a language, they need to discover the infinite variety in language. As is true with regularity, variety in the language is intuitively understood by students. They are aware that they do not talk with each other the way they talk with their parents, and that people in Boston talk differently from people in Charleston. However, since the students spend a good amount of their time in English classes learning a moderately formal variety of standard English, they tend to think of this form

as the language and all other forms as less than language. Students need to spend a little time in class cultivating an appreciation and understanding of forms of English other than their own.

It is at this point that literature and language studies can legitimately move close together. Since literature records people, their culture and language, it may be used by linguists when they need a corpus of natural language. Particularly, literature offers a class a convenient course for regional and social dialects. For a study of rural black English I suggest the following passage from *The Color Purple*:

Dear God,

Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr. ____ say,
Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—
he don't finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he
do. Remind me of Pa.

Harpo ast me, How come you stubborn? he don't ast
How come you his wife? Nobody ast that.

I say, Just born that way, I reckon.

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't
hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be
outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do
not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a
tree. That's how come I know trees fear man.

Harpo say, I love Somebody.
I say, Huh?
He say, A Girl.
I say, You do?
He say, Yeah. Us plan to marry.
Marry, I say. You not old enough to marry.
I is, he say. I'm seventeen. She fifteen. Old enough.
What her mama say, I ast.
Ain't talk to her mama.
What her daddy say?
Ain't talk to him neither.
Well, what she say?
Us ain't never spoke. (Walker 23-24)

The objective for this particular text is to help students understand a form of the language that is not mainstream language. To achieve this

we should accompany the text with a series of questions which will help students see the dominant features of the language sample before them:

- (1) What is different about the treatment of the verb in Cause she my wife and the corresponding standard English form 'Cause she is my wife?
- (2) Cite a few more sentences where the verb is deleted.
- (3) Cite a few where it is not.
- (4) Which verb is usually deleted?
- (5) If your generalization is that forms of the verb be are deleted, what does The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks do to your generalization?
- (6) Some students of black dialect say black speakers distinguish between continuous (progressive) and non-continuous action (Dillard 46-52). Could this distinction save your generalization?
- (7) Turn the statement He wants to practice so that he will win into a why question. Compare your question with the embedded question Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me and describe the difference between the two forms.
- (8) Describe the verb form in third person present tense in black dialect.

I suggest rural Appalachian dialect be studied with the rural black dialect. An everyday tale from *Latchpins of the Lost Cove* offers a good example of this dialect:

Fronzer stopped whittling a moment before speaking. "You can't ever tell about fish any more," he offered. "They seem to have a mind of their own. Tuther day I caught a big rainbow peart nigh long as your arm. It wrestled me so hard that it wore itself down 'till it wasn't much bigger than a horneyhead. These fish around here seem to be acting up here of late, and I think I know the reason."

"How in the thunder are they acting?" Morefield asked.

"Real crazy, Morefield. Some of them try to swim sideways and others swim backards. One old red hoss I seen yesterday was trying to swim two ways at the same time."

"I do declare!" Morefield responded. "I wonder what has got into them."

"Them fish were drunk, Morefield, just as sure as I sit here. When the High Sheriff come up 'tuther day and tore up Bear John's still, he dumped all the mash in the creek. It can't be anything else."

While the two oldtimers were meditating, Ceart Hughes sauntered by with a big string of horneyheads. Morefield eyed the fish. "Ceart, you ain't been gone more than twenty minutes. How in the Sam Hill did you hook all them there fish?"

"I didn't hook nary a none," Ceart replied.

"Don't tell me you seined them and the water this high," Morefield offered.

"Nothing of the kind," Ceart quipped. "I out thunk them."

"What you mean?" Fonzer piped in.

"There wasn't much to it," Ceart declared. "All I did was sprinkle a can of Bruton snuff in the creek and before you know it, them there fish started coming upon the bank to get them a birch toothbrush to use with the snuff. All I had to do was just grab them up before they had time to get back in the water. Fish, you know, especially these around here, ain't got much sense."

"That's what I just been trying to tell Morefield," Fonzer declared. "Now I reckon that he will believe me." (Young 84-85)

The following questions can serve as a basis for analysis of the Appalachian dialect:

- (1) Make a list of words that are distinctive of this dialect.
- (2) Dictionaries of standard English list "them" as a pronoun only. Is that true for this dialect?
- (3) This dialect has some unusual verb forms in the past tense. What are they?
- (4) What is an example of euphemistic cursing in the dialect?

This study of dialects will give students practice in language analysis and some awareness of language differences, an objective of language study

listed by the College Board (24). Moreover, the study of dialects helps remove prejudices anyone might have for these dialects.

Once students are fully aware of the regularity and diversity of language, it is good for them to discover the various functions language serves. We are prone to think that the purpose of language is largely the exchanging of ideas, but many people go through whole periods of conversation without ever exchanging an idea. Often language is intended more to persuade than inform; in such cases, the communication of ideas may be of little importance. "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" by Christopher Marlowe is a good text for students to analyze to discover how this use of language works:

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That hills and valleys, dales and fields,
Or woods or steepy mountain yields.

And we will sit upon the rocks,
And see the shepherds feed their flocks
By shallow rivers, to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies;
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;

A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;
Fair-lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold;

A belt of straw and ivy buds
With coral clasps and amber studs—
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me and be my Love.

The shepherd swains shall dance and sign
For thy delight each May morning—
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me and be my Love.

This poem may be used to show the persuasive qualities of language and students will easily see them. We might ask our students why the shepherd is talking. What are the rewards the poet offers in return for his lover's affections? Is the reasoning realistic? One of the most interesting

things about this poem is that the message is coded in a very artificial medium. The pastoral tradition controls the form the argument takes. None of the promises are exactly what they appear to be. Is the poet offering his love a life of sitting upon the rocks and seeing the shepherds feed their flocks, or is the image functioning as a symbol for happiness in whatever form? We might ask if the argument is persuasive. Are pastoral images meaningful to urban people?

I suggest an exercise connected with this poem. Have students write a parody of the poem in which they try to convince someone to marry them. Then have the class analyze the values assumed in the poem as indicated by the symbols used for love.

In addition to the use of language in persuasion, literature offers students a way to discover the use of language in social interaction. Such a use of language is seen in an early courtship scene between Darcy and Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen:

"You mean to frighten me, Mr. Darcy, by coming in all this state to hear me? But I will not be alarmed though your sister does play so well. There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me."

"I shall not say that you are mistaken," he replied, "because you could not really believe me to entertain any design of alarming you; and I have had the pleasure of your acquaintance long enough to know, that you find great enjoyment in occasionally professing opinions which in fact are not your own."

Elizabeth laughed heartily at this picture of herself, and said to Colonel Fitzwilliam, "Your cousin will give you a very pretty notion of me, and teach you not to believe a word I say. I am particularly unlucky in meeting with a person so well able to expose my real character, in a part of the world, where I had hoped to pass myself off with some degree of credit. Indeed, Mr. Darcy, it is very ungenerous in you to mention all that you knew to my disadvantage in Hertfordshire—and, give me leave to say, very impolitic too—for it is provoking me to retaliate, and such things may come out, as will shock your relations to hear."

"I am not afraid of you," said he, smilingly.

"Pray let me hear what you have to accuse him of," cried Colonel Fitzwilliam. "I should like to know how he behaves among strangers."

"You shall hear then— but prepare yourself for something very dreadful. The first time of my ever seeing something very dreadful. The first time of my ever seeing him in Hertfordshire, you must know, was at a ball— and at this ball, what do you think he did? He danced only four dances! I am sorry to pain you— but so it was. He danced only four dances, though gentlemen were scarce; and, to my certain knowledge, more than one young lady was sitting down in want of a partner. Mr. Darcy, you cannot deny the fact."

"I certainly have not the talent which some people possess," said Darcy, "of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done."

"My fingers," said Elizabeth, "do not move over this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women's do. They have not the same force or rapidity, and do not produce the same expression. But then I have always supposed to be my own fault— because I would not take the trouble of practising. It is not that I do not believe my fingers as capable as any other woman's of superior execution."

Darcy smiled and said, "You are perfectly right. You have employed your time much better. No one admitted to the privilege of hearing you, can think any thing wanting. We neither of us perform to strangers." (120-121)

The passage from *Pride and Prejudice* is a masterpiece for language analysis because it displays the indirectness of much conversation and the restrictions that social conventions place on what can be said, but it might be difficult for students to analyze. To help them, we might point out to them that the conversation takes place at a party where Elizabeth, Fitzwilliam, Darcy, Lady Catherine, Ann, Charlotte, and Mr. Collins can all hear what is said. We might ask : To whom are Elizabeth and Darcy talking? What role does Fitzwilliam play? What restrictions does the presence of others put on the conversation between Elizabeth and Darcy? When Elizabeth tells Darcy, "My fingers do not move over this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women's do," she is not making a literal statement— so what is she saying? When Darcy replies, "We neither of us perform to strangers," does he understand the code phrase Elizabeth has sent him?

How does the social code which requires Elizabeth and Darcy to behave as a lady and a gentleman control this conversation?

Another social use of language that can be discovered through literature is coherence and identity within a group. This function is beautifully illustrated in Walter Dean Myers' *fast sam, cool clyde, and stuff*. Two days after his family moves into a new apartment, Stuff goes downstairs to the other children in the building:

"Hey, man, what apartment you live in?" one guy with a real long head asked me.

"Four S," I said, trying to be cool.

"Can you play any ball?" Long-head asked.

"He can't play no ball," another guy said. "His feet go the wrong way. Look at him."

I looked down at my feet. They looked okay to me.

"Man, the cat that used to live in 4S sure could play some ball. You should be ashamed to even move into that apartment." Long-head shook his head and looked at me like I was smelly or something. "Can you stuff?"

"Do you mean dunk?" I asked. I knew what he meant. I could play basketball pretty well, but there was no way I could jump over the rim and stuff the ball. No way. I couldn't even come close.

"Yeah, turkey, can you?" They all looked at me.

"If I get a good start," I lied, asking myself why I was lying.

"Hey, Clyde, I want you to meet the new cat from Four S. I told him that the old cat that used to live there could play some ball, and he told us he could stuff."

"We ought to call him Stuffer," another guy said.

"Or how about Hot Stuff," Long-head put in. (10-11)

The teenagers in Myers' group are in early adolescence, a stage when new members are welcomed into social groups. Acceptance into the social

group, however, is also an acceptance into a linguistic community. One joins that group by demonstrating an ability to manipulate the language of the group and to become a member one takes on a new name. The following questions may be used to accompany the text:

- (1) Who gave Hot Stuff the final form of his nickname?
- (2) Who had given Long-head his nickname?
- (3) By what other name is Hot Stuff called?
- (4) What is a word for "person" that all speakers of this dialect use?
- (5) What is an adjective characteristic of this group meaning "suave" or "self-assured"?
- (6) What is the meaning of "some" in the phrase "some ball"?

Students can use writing to further explore the use of language for social action. Since the social restraint observed by Darcy and Elizabeth seems far removed from what appears to be the almost cruel frankness of Hot Stuff and friends, students might do essays in which they compare the merits of the two linguistic codes. Another interesting essay topic might be a study of various nicknames and how they came about.

Finally, students should discover that language mirrors the people and the society which use it. It is at this point that language analysis becomes literary analysis. Dorothy Van Ghent does an excellent job showing how the vocabulary of *Pride and Prejudice* indicates the materialistic society of the novel and how the characters' language mirrors their personalities. Mr. Collins' proposal to Elizabeth will illustrate outward form reflecting inward character:

"But the fact is, that being as I am, to inherit this estate after the death of your honored father (who, however, may live many years longer), I could not satisfy myself without resolving to chuse a wife from among his daughters, that the loss to them might be as little as possible, when the melancholy event takes place— which, however, as I have already said, may not be for several years." (74-75)

Students will readily recognize how the inflated language indicates an inflated ego, but we might ask them to count the number of words in what they would consider the simplest proposal and compare that amount with the number in Collins' speech. We might ask our students what kind of person repeats himself in only six lines? What type of person proposes as a sense of obligation?

To make language study interesting to students, teachers must approach it as a matter of discovery and interpretation, much as they approach the teaching of literature. Whatever the text students have before them, we can help them discover the language phenomena within that text, much as they do when they read a short story or do peer evaluations of papers. Language thus becomes more like the other two members of the English trinity, and since it is no longer so different, may be more tolerated.

Works Cited

- Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1966.
- Christian, Donna, Walt Wolfram and Nanjo Dube. *Variation and Change in Geographically Isolated Communities: Appalachian English and Ozark English*. Tuscaloosa: University Press of Alabama. Publication of the American Dialect Society. Number 74. 1988.
- The College Entrance Examination Board. *Academic Preparation in English: Teaching for Transition from High School to College*. New York: College Board Publications, 1985.
- Dillard, J. L. *Black English*. 1972. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.
- Myers, Walter Dean. *fast sam, cool clyde, and stuff*. New York: The Viking Press, 1975.
- Van Ghent, Dorothy. *The English Novel: Form and Function*. 1953. New York: Harper and Row, 1961.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. 1982. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985.
- Young, Malone. *Latchpins of the Lost Cove*. Johnson City, Tn: Latchpins Press, 1987.

R. Chesla Sharp is a professor of English at East Tennessee State University.