At our last meeting, several people suggested it would be interesting to continue with our theme of Education – what is the meaning of education, and what is the role of school and family in fostering it. I have been reading more of my father (Roland Harris)’s work on education, and this morning I would like to focus on his ideas on the teaching of language in schools. He investigated particularly the situation of working with 11-15 year olds over a complete intelligence range and the problem of how to ensure children of that age achieve fluency in their native language: indeed, why is this so difficult, and what is the real significance of this achievement. He is writing of course about English, and English has some complications that other languages may not have – to do with its diverse history, and now its widespread use as a world language, as well as the dialectal or socially-modified forms in which it is spoken in the home country. But in terms of the relation between teacher and child, or children and the education system, similar principles apply to whatever language is native to the child.

The title of this talk is taken from an unfinished paper on ‘Co-operation and the growth of the child’ that he wrote at about the time of launching the Tavistock Schools Counsellors Course. The word ‘co-operation’ has a particular significance, since it is used to describe the child’s orientation towards the total educational environment – family and school. It includes the idea of reciprocity, since this is a two-way interaction between the individual child and his environment; and also has a sense of the internalization of objects who guide the child from within. Thus he uses the word to describe the very origins of language, and also the teacher’s endeavour to develop the child’s fluency through interest and exercise in the schoolroom. He notes the centuries-old misapprehension that ‘the first words were names of things’. Many school grammar books treat language as if it were a system of codification, rather than communication. Yet modern philosophy of language development recognizes how (as in the Platonic idea of anamnesis) children learn by a complicated process of remembering, imitation, and identification of the world around them.
with speaking objects – such as parents or teachers, who become internalized, so that the unconscious may be made conscious:

Influenced maybe by the order of chapters in courses of English, [they] may hazard a guess that the first words were names of things. However, in watching infants one may notice that a relatively complex situation is among the primary names on occasion. “Bye-bye”, the first recognizable word that my elder daughter spoke, meant roughly “I see that you are going and I am filled with desolation, anger, fear.”

Symbols are generated by emotions not things. Co-operation is a word that denotes the underlying process that makes development possible, however unwanted or hateful it may feel; it pushes the mind into symbol-formation to contain the meaning of the experience, just as Bion uses the example of the child learning to walk as a good early illustration of alpha-function. The child becomes (in infancy) a feeder, then a walker and a talker – all these achievements depend on a capacity for co-operation. My father believed that an awareness of the factors that constitute co-operation should also underlie the way language is taught in schools. Only with the child’s co-operation can ‘correct’ grammar be taught, in a way that will be used and become part of his life, not just a mechanical game for collecting exam points.

In the course of his research and publications Roland Harris tackled in various ways what were, for different reasons, these two consistently most unpopular aspects of the English curriculum, poetry and grammar – that is, emotion and structure. One is awkward and disturbing, the other is ‘difficult’. With regard to grammar, the problem that frustrated many teachers, and that modern linguists recognized, was not just that it was difficult – it was that it did not describe accurately the living structure of the English language, nor was there a consensus even amongst grammarians. He described the situation at the time as ‘authoritarian chaos’. His D Phil dissertation (1962) was an Experimental Enquiry into the Usefulness of Teaching Formal Grammar to Children aged Twelve to Fourteen, and was highly influential on the changing course of language teaching in England and (I believe) also in America, in subsequent years. Within the participating London schools, the experiment spanned a complete mix of social class and intelligence range. The oft cited conclusion was that the written work of children who are taught no grammar improves faster than that of children taught grammar; and that at that age, grammar is in effect unteachable to all but a few, and those to a

nellaidea - platonica dell’anamnesi), i bambini imparano attraverso un complicato processo di ricordare, dell’imitare e di identificarsi con oggetti parlando – quali genitori o insegnanti, poi interiorizzati, in modo che l’incosciente possa diventare conscio:

Forse influenzati dall’ordine dei capitoli nei corsi di Inglese [essi] possono avventurarsi nell’intuizione che le prime parole fossero nomi delle cose, tuttavia, osservando gli infanti, si può notare che una situazione relativamente complessa traspare a volte fra le prime parole. “Bye-bye, fu la prima parola riconoscibile che la mia figlia maggiore pronunciò, che vagamente significava ” io vedo che te ne stai andando e sono riempita di desolazione, rabbia, paura”.

I simboli vengono generati da emozioni non le cose. Co-operazione è una parola che denota il processo sottostante che rende possibile lo sviluppo, per quanto indesiderabile o odioso possa essere sentito; spinge la mente verso la formazione simbolica per contenere il significato dell’esperienza, proprio come Bion usa l’esempio del bambino che apprende a camminare come una buona prima illustrazione della funzione- alfa. Il bambino diventa (nell’infanzia) un mangiatore, poi un camminatore e infine un parlante – e tutte queste conquiste dipendono dalla capacità di co-operazione. Mio padre credeva che una certa consapevolezza dei fattori che costituiscono la co-operazione, dovesse anche essere alla base dei metodi con cui il linguaggio viene insegnato nelle scuole. Solamente con la co-operazione del bambino può venire insegnata una grammatica corretta, in modo che possa essere usata e diventi parte della sua vita, non solo un gioco meccanico per accumulare punti agli esami.

Nel corso di questa ricerca e pubblicazione Roland Harris affrontò il problema di definire cosa fossero infine questi due aspetti per diversi motivi molto impopolari, del curriculum inglese: la poesia e la grammatica – vale a dire emozione e struttura. L’una è strana e disturbante, l’altra è “difficile”. Riguardo la grammatica, il problema che frustrava molti insegnanti, e che linguisti moderni riconobbero, era non solo che fosse difficile, ma anche che non descrivesse in modo accurato la struttura vivente della lingua inglese, e che non ci fosse neppure consenso persino fra i grammatici. Egli descrisse la situazione del tempo come "caos autoritario". La sua tesi di dottorato (1962) fu una Ricerca Sperimentale sull’Utilità dell’Insegnamento della Grammatica Formale ai Bambini fra i Dodici e i Quattordici Anni, ed ebbe grande influenza nel cambiare il corso dell’insegnamento della lingua in Inghilterra e (io credo) anche in America negli anni successivi. Tra gli studenti delle scuole di Londra che partecipavano alla ricerca, fu scelto un campione rappresentativo per classi sociali e livelli di intelligenza.La conclusione spesso citata fu che il lavoro scritto di bambini cui non viene insegnata la grammatica migliora più in fretta di quello dei bambini a cui la grammatica viene insegnata; e che in effetti a quell’età la grammatica non è
very limited degree. It was a conclusion that came as no surprise to many teachers; what differentiated this study from many previous ones (in America as well as Britain) was its scope and thoroughness, and the development and testing of realistic measuring implements, which were then deployed over a timescale sufficient to meaningfully assess children's stylistic maturation as well as their mechanical knowledge. Unmeasurable variables were also discussed, such as the experience and attitude of the teachers taking part, and the problems of defining correctness in an ever-changing, dialectal, world language.

The various assumptions about the usefulness of teaching formal grammar (as a 'pure science', an intellectual discipline, a transferable skill, etc) reflected certain illusions about the nature of how languages develop and how children learn language, which no longer corresponded with twentieth-century philosophical and psychological awareness. The transfer of grammatical recognition to writing skills in English or even to learning other languages had often been disproved, and the argument that grammar was useful in sharpening analytical and critical reading skills had no basis in evidence. The most that could be hoped for was that the 'struggle' was in itself a mindbuilding exercise, a role-model to set lifetime habits of dogged determination. In an article summarizing the conclusions of his grammar experiment (1965), Harris cites a G.C.E. examiner's report noting the 'disturbing feature' that students who did well in the grammar test sometimes displayed in their essays 'an inability to construct a correct sentence'. He asks, 'Do we in teaching English pay too much attention to our pupils' ignorance of grammar, and too little to their errors of thought?' (1965, p. 197). English teachers may enjoy grammar; but it should not be a self-indulgent game to be played perhaps with some of the brighter pupils, at the expense of developing an effective system of language instruction that would enable pupils to become (as Milton put it) 'competently wise in their mother dialect' (Of Education, 1644):

A grammatical fact is no less worthy of dignity than any other. We grammarians are left free to chase our definitions and functions just for the sake of catching them, and not for food. We are surrounded by a universe of facts, and we choose to remember that "the" and "a" always accompany nouns. This, as between consenting adults, is no harm – but have teachers the right to teach these things to children? ('Disturbing Feature,' 1965, 201)

Insegnabile a tutti ma solo a pochi e a questi ultimi pochi in grado molto limitato. La conclusione non fu una sorpresa per molti insegnanti; ciò che differenziava questo studio dai molti precedenti (in America come in Inghilterra) fu la sua dimensione e meticolosità, e lo sviluppo e la valutazione di strumenti realistici di misura, che venivano poi impiegati in scala di tempo sufficiente per valutare in maniera significativa la maturazione stilistica dei bambini insieme alla loro conoscenza tecnica. Furono discusse anche variabili non misurabili, quali l'esperienza e la disposizione degli insegnanti che avevano partecipato alla ricerca, e il problema di definire cosa sia la correttezza in una lingua specifica di una nazione ma usata in tutto il mondo e in stato di continuo cambiamento.

Le varie ipotesi riguardo l'insegnare grammatica formale (come "scienza pura, una disciplina intellettuale, una competenza trasferibile, ecc.) riflettono certe idee sbagliate sulle lingue si sviluppano e sul come i bambini apprendono il linguaggio, il che non corrisponde più alla consapevolezza filosofica e psicologica del ventesimo secolo. L'apporto del riconoscimento grammaticale alle capacità di scrittura inglese o persino nell'insegnare altre lingue, è stato spesso smentito, e l'argomentazione che la grammatica fosse utile nel rendere più acute le capacità di lettura analitica e critica non trovò basi nell'evidenza. Il massimo che fu possibile sperare fu che la "fatica" fosse in sé stessa un esercizio di costruzione mentale, un Modello per mettere a punto abitudini di tutta una vita di determinazione accanita. In un articolo che dava un sommario delle conclusioni del suo esperimento sulla grammatica (1965), Harris cita la relazione di un esaminatore G.C.E. che mise in evidenza il "tratto disturbante" che gli studenti che fecero bene il test grammaticale mostravano talvolta nei loro temi "una incapacità di costruire frasi corrette". Egli si chiese "forse che noi insegnando l'Inglese diamo troppa attenzione all'ignoranza della grammatica dei nostri allievi, e troppo poca ai loro errori di pensiero?" (1965, p.197). Magari gli insegnanti inglesi possono trovare piacere nella grammatica, ma questa non dovrebbe essere una partita auto compiacente da giocarsi forse con gli allievi più brillanti, ma non a scapito dello sviluppare un sistema effettivo di insegnamento del linguaggio che possa rendere capaci gli studenti di diventare (come disse Milton) "competentemente saggi nel loro dialetto materno" (Sull'Educazione, 1644).

Un fatto grammaticale non è meno degno di rispetto di ogni altro. Noi grammatici siamo lasciati liberi di inseguire le nostre definizioni e funzioni proprio per il piacere di catturarle, e non per cibo. Siamo circondati da un universo di fatti, e scegliamo di ricordarci che "un" e "il" accompagnano "un nome". Questo, fra adulti consenzienti, non è un male – ma gli insegnanti hanno il diritto di insegnare queste cose ai bambini? ("Elemento di disturbo", 1965, 201)

Il linguaggio dovrebbe servire la vita e i suoi bisogni – dovrebbe provvedere "cibo",
Language should serve life and its needs – it should provide ‘food’, in the age-old metaphor (‘Knowledge is food’, as Milton also said - Paradise Lost): ‘It is of little value trying to teach pupils sentence structures which are too complex for the thought relationships the pupils are able to master… it is language without commitment, without life’ (1962, p. 216). Grammar can be turned into a religion whose laws are comprehended only by superego figures: ‘Religions thrive on guilt, and prescriptive grammar is the guilt of linguists’ (p. 215).

Harris’s vision was that the world would be a better place if people were capable of ‘putting their words in order’ – not for purposes of persuasion or indoctrination or gameplaying but for ‘co-operativeness’: ‘Human fitness to survive’, he wrote, ‘means the ability to talk and write and listen and read in ways that increase the chances for each of us and fellow members of our species to survive together’ (1962, p. 249). ‘Our nerve endings finish where language falls silent’ (p. 248). The existing official picture of our grammatical structure does not describe the structure of our thought processes. How can the study of language help the child become a citizen of the world?

Along with those in the I. A. Richards, Wittgenstein and Chomskyan traditions, Harris saw ‘the inseparability of form and meaning [as] one of the most important considerations for the shaping of a language course’ (1962, p. 92), for when form and meaning are separated, there is a danger of the ‘parrot-like imitation’ that actually disguises a deep ignorance of what the literature is actually about, and is moreover ‘out of keeping with an organic understanding of language’ (p. 88). Language, he reminds us, is ‘apprehended intuitively’; not deciphered like a code, and Piaget is quoted to the effect that the whole is understood before the parts are analysed. The kind of superficially-correct, deeply-incorrect learning that offers no nourishment may be contrasted with ‘nonsense’, which is not merely entertaining, but can be correct, in so far as ‘when we see nonsense words we look in fact upon the shadows of other meaningful words which could take meaningful forms’. Nonsense, a form of poetry, can have both structural correctness and imaginative potential. To first establish correct usage, using entertaining or relevant material, and then at a later stage of development when fluency has been established, scientifically to describe or even modify and expand our definition of correctness, seemed to him the proper developmental order for studying the native language. So he considered the sixth form (from age 16 onwards) the most profitable place...
to argue about our present inheritance, or even better, about the new description of the actual structure of our language which surely we school teachers live in hope of receiving from the universities in the not-too-distant future. The only disturbing feature is that at sixth-form level we cease to study grammar.1 (1965, p. 202)

With this developmental view of language in mind, Harris suggests that instead of regarding language as a tool, we use the analogy of ‘muscles’: ‘As these are trained by exercising, so is language learnt. It is learnt by the manipulation of whole meanings – not lexical meaning simply, but structural meaning; not the parts of speech, but speeches’ (p. 217). ‘New thoughts and experiences will need to express themselves in new words and forms’ (p. 216). Once ‘knowing’ is differentiated from ‘naming’, the child’s existing knowledge is generally much greater than might appear. By contrast with the ‘parrot-like imitation’ encouraged by formal grammar with its emphasis on naming (a ‘paranoid-schizoid’ game), the emotional type of imitation - associated with the ‘depressive position’ in psychoanalytic terms – puts meaning first, and is part of a wider mental complex that uses musical experimentation in association with the ‘object’ or parental person who knows the language. ‘Bye-bye’ may be the utmost stretch of an infant’s philosophical capabilities at a certain point in development; but the same fundamental principle applies to older children – they will have attained a certain level of thoughtfulness, and this level needs to be perceived and understood by the teacher before it can be developed in an organic way. The exercise of linguistic muscles, dialectically with parents and teachers, means coming to ‘agreement about the denotation of sounds, or that imitation which is natural agreement’. The spoken word results from parent and child ‘agreeing’ on the meaning (however unwanted it may be), and in a logical progression, so does the creation of correct sentences. This is the meaning of co-operativeness.

A ‘truly educative form’ of teaching does not merely prescribe, but ‘demands from the pupil active co-operation and choice, a sharing of responsibility for the organic growth of language itself’ (1962, p. 214). (In modern, Meltzerian psychoanalytic terms, this organic process is the ‘aesthetic object’, that governs both children and teachers, just as in psychoanalysis the analytic process governs both analysand and analyst). But renouncing the ‘narrower values of prescriptive usage or of grammar’ confronts teachers with the harder task of deciding ‘other criteria by which to judge standards of acceptable speech and writing’, and requires ‘a clearer understanding of the nature of communication itself’ (1966, p. 216).

1 This ‘disturbing feature’ is his response to the examiner’s report of the same name.
119). Harris suggests teachers themselves could become ‘better informed about language and structure, and impart the subsequent skill by a sort of imperceptible osmosis, and not by a resented injection, to their pupils.’ He adds, ironically, that ‘In due course, it may be evidence will be available that a class taught by the ‘new grammar’ can outfly a non-grammar class’ (1962, p. 212). The ‘new grammar’ that was much talked about but not yet invented was, in his view, rather a chimera.

How can teachers be helped to establish this ‘osmotic’ rather than prescriptive form of learning? This is the task that Harris addresses in all his textbooks and other writings. What is distinctive about his approach, in the Experimental Enquiry, is the application of scientific method to a strictly delimited problem, but in a way that creates repercussions with the total context in which the child has existence and needs to become ‘educated’, that is, to find identity. This is intimately linked to the relationship with the teacher, highlighting the need for ‘integrative’ or ‘interpersonal’ modes of communication (terminology from D. W. Harding and from psychoanalysis respectively - in Harris, 1955, 1966). He expands on this idea in several articles. The English teacher, he wrote in 1966, was now expected to fulfil an increasingly ‘diffuse’ role in facilitating the child’s overall development, in a way that takes social factors as well as the total curriculum into account. At the heart of this lies the responsibility for enabling the child to learn to use language to ‘manage life’. This is not a mechanical, but a deeply psychological, skill.

Harris calls this alternative mode of language teaching a ‘grammar of situation’ (p. 246), and presents it with examples in all his writings and textbooks. The classroom is ‘a laboratory for the manufacture of linguistic situations’ (p. 216), an opportunity to demonstrate the workings of ‘language in action’:

The active co-operation of children may be assured if their needs to control and respond to a situation are satisfied. They become responsible for language as they perceive the link between language and their life. (p. 266)

These opportunities to observe language in action, he says, all arise naturally in the context of class work; and it is better to make full use of these than to invent artificial excuses for categorising language elements. Through usage it can be demonstrated which elements in language are fixed and which are fluid or ‘free for experiment’. della comunicazione stessa” (1966, p.119). Harris suggerisce che gli stessi insegnanti possano diventare “meglio informati a proposito del linguaggio e della sua struttura, e trasmettano abilità conseguenti attraverso una sorta di impercettibile osmosi, e non attraverso una sorta di iniezione (resented injection) risentita ai loro allievi. E aggiunge, ironicamente, che “Col tempo, può succedere che diventi disponibile l’evidenza che una classe a cui venga insegnata la nuda grammatica possa volare più alto di una classe senza grammatica” (1962, p. 212). La “nuova grammatica” che è stato molto parlato, ma non ancora inventato era, a suo avviso, piuttosto una chimera.


Egli definisce questo modo alternativo dell’insegnamento del linguaggio una “grammatica della situazione” (p. 246), e lo presenta con esempi in tutti i suoi scritti e libri di testo. La classe è “un laboratorio per la manifattura di situazioni linguistiche” (p.216), un’opportunità per dimostrare il processo del “linguaggio in atto”:

La co-operazione attiva dei bambini può essere assicurata se i loro bisogni di controllare e di rispondere ad una situazione vengono soddisfatti. Allora essi diventano responsabili del linguaggio nel momento in cui percepiscono il legame fra il linguaggio e la loro vita. (p. 266).

Queste opportunità di osservare il linguaggio in azione, egli dice, sorgono tutte naturalmente nel contesto del lavoro nella classe; ed è meglio fare pieno uso di queste che inventare scuse artificiali per costruire categorie di elementi della lingua. Si può dimostrare attraverso l’uso quali elementi della lingua sono fissi o quali sono fluidi oppure “liberi per esperimento".
At the same time, branching out further, these language situations may be placed in the wider context of language development, with its sense of history and of personal development. The focus of a language situation can be both detailed and comprehensive. Children ‘like to speculate about the origins of speech’ and though (like grammarians) they might begin by assuming that the first words denoted things, their natural curiosity may be built upon and this preconception may be overcome:

The pupils have to examine the processes of language: how do words arise, change, decay; what gives them stability; what part have dialectal forms to play, and what is standard English; what of slang and idiom; what is symbolism, abstraction, and what are their uses and dangers; how do we avoid boring a reader – how insist, or suggest, or invite, rebuff, demand, puzzle, or inform; does spelling matter; what parts of language are free for experiment and what parts must be learnt; what history is still living in the full meanings of words, and what are the links between our history and our speech – these are the sorts of question the syllabus could contain. (p. 217)

In the wider world, as well as that of the individual child, language is evolving; and school pupils can begin to feel responsible for the world that is made in part through their use of language, especially given the status of English as a world language that does not belong only to people living in the UK. In this lies the answer to apparent problems of dialectal and local or slang usage. The teacher needs to bear in mind the degree to which children's errors are not necessarily due to lack of knowledge, but may be experienced by them under a different heading; thus,

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The error itself [is] often a convention of the speech of some groups. “Alan and me” is felt presumably as a sort of collective noun which might take a singular verb, whereas “Alan and I”, if used, are conceived as separate persons. The correction or rather convention-alization of language forms is of course very much a social matter. If children do not wish to be like the people who they fancy say “Alan and I ran…” they will continue to say “Alan and me ran….” even when they know through grammatical or social learning that the one form is structurally unjustifiable or socially limiting. (p. 135)

Grammatical or social learning is not enough: correction can only be effective where there is ‘genuine ignorance’ corresponding to some part of the child that would actually like to ‘be like’ the kind of person who speaks correctly, rather than to be subsumed with their friend into a collective identity, preferring the security of

Allo stesso tempo allargando oltre, tali situazioni di linguaggio possono ben essere collocate nel contesto più ampio dello sviluppo della lingua, nel suo senso storico e di sviluppo personale. La messa a fuoco della situazione del linguaggio può essere guar-data in modo sia dettagliato che globale. I bambini “amano interrogarsi sull’origine del linguaggio” sebbene (allo stesso modo dei grammatici) possano cominciare con il ritenere che le prime parole denotassero cose, e la loro naturale curiosità può essere una buona base di partenza e questo preconcetto può essere superato:

Gli allievi hanno da esaminare i processi della lingua: come le parole nascano, cambino e decadano; cosa dia loro stabilità, che ruolo possano giocare le forme dialettali, e cosa sia l’Inglese standard; cosa ci sia di dialettale e di espressione idiomatica, cosa sia il sim-bolismo, l’astrazione, e cosa siano il loro uso e i loro pericoli; come possiamo evitare di annoiare il lettore – come insistere, o suggerire, o invitare, rimproverare, rifiutare, porre domande, rendere perplessi, oppure informare; è importante la compitazione delle let-tiere; quali parti del linguaggio siano libere per sperimentazione e quali parti debbano essere apprese; cosa della storia è ancora vivo nel pieno significato delle parole e quali siano i legami fra la nostra storia e il nostro discorso – sono questi i tipi di domande che il libro di grammatica dovrebbe contenere. (p.217)

Nel mondo allargato, così come in quello del singolo bambino, la lingua è in stato di evoluzione e gli alunni possono cominciare a sentirsi responsabili del mondo che viene costruito in parte attraverso il loro uso del linguaggio, specialmente dato lo status dell’Inglese come lingua del mondo che non appartiene solamente a coloro che vivono nel U.K.. In questo sta la risposta ai problemi che emergono sull’uso dei dialetti e delle parlate locali oppure dello slang. L’insegnante ha bisogno di tenere in mente finito che punto gli errori dei bambini sono dovuti a mancanza di cono-scenza, oppure da essi sperimentati a titolo diverso, quindi

L’errore in sé stesso è spesso una convenzione del linguaggio di alcuni gruppi “Alan e me” viene presumibilmente percepito come un nome collettivo che può richiedere un verbo al singolare, mentre se viene usata la forma “Alan ed io”, questi sono concepiti come due persone separate. Scegliere tra la correzione e il rendere convenzionale l’uso di forme di linguaggio è piuttosto una questione sociale: se i bambini non desiderano essere come le persone che secondo loro dicono “Alan ed io correvo …..” continueranno a dire “Alan e me correvi” anche quando sanno attraverso l’apprendimento grammaticale o sociale che una forma è strutturalmente ingiustificabile o limitante socialmente (p.135).

L’apprendimento grammaticale o sociale non è sufficiente: la correzione può solo essere efficace dove ci sia una “ignoranza genuina” che corrisponda ad una parte del bambino che vorrebbe davvero “essere come” il tipo di persona che parla in modo corretto, piuttosto che essere compreso, insieme ai suoi amici entro una identità
being ‘socially limited’. They may know the correct form and even tick the box in a grammar test but they cannot – will not – use it in practice, because the teacher has not established a sufficient identificatory pull, such that they feel secure in talking like him. Only then can they use their suppressed knowledge to ‘manage life’. The question of when the social group becomes a claustrum or ‘basic assumption group’ (Bion) that restricts individual development is analogous to the problem of when a dialect form ‘loses the colour and dignity of dialect and becomes simply a class-conscious restriction’ (p. 257).

A ‘grammar of situation’ therefore grows out of the context of the English lesson and takes the nature of the identification with the teacher into account. The teaching of grammar needs to be brought in line with the deep grammar of psychological development. ‘Everybody learns’ – including the teacher. But the teacher’s diffuse or semi-parental role – enabling emotional containment as well as academic achievement – can only be fulfilled if language teaching is effective; for ‘without primary skill the secondary and more important value experiences are not finally possible through the medium of English.’ In a full-spectrum school, ‘experience of life and chronological age are often more advanced than reading age’ so the material in textbooks is often inappropriate. Instead, a ‘grammar of situation’ uses material that arises naturally in class in the context of discussing issues significant to the students. In ‘The organization of English’ (1958) he writes:

It could be stimulating of teachers thought of English rather as a craft like woodwork than as a shrine of literary values or an Open Sesame to spiritual ones… there is a… danger in the vague and powerful worship of psychological and social aims in which by some magic a valuable experience is to be attained without… any visible means of support. Both pedantry and the neglect of craft avoid the full difficulty and lose the full reward of striving for the requisite skills – the linguistic skills, correct observation of the manners of usage, aptness and elegance of diction, pattern and variety of structure, and so on.

Craftsmanship, he says, is ‘unfashionable’ when discussing the subject of teaching English: ‘We prefer spelling or the Messianic experience’ – grammar, or worship. He was well acquainted with the kind of unrealistic ‘messianic’ illusions that could be promulgated by liberal enthusiasts of all professions, in reaction against the ‘authoritarian chaos’ of older teaching methods. His view on all types of avant-garde religion was that:

A ‘grammar of situation’ therefore grows out of the context of the English lesson and takes the nature of the identification with the teacher into account. The teaching of grammar needs to be brought in line with the deep grammar of psychological development. ‘Everybody learns’ – including the teacher. But the teacher’s diffuse or semi-parental role – enabling emotional containment as well as academic achievement – can only be fulfilled if language teaching is effective; for ‘without primary skill the secondary and more important value experiences are not finally possible through the medium of English.’ In a full-spectrum school, ‘experience of life and chronological age are often more advanced than reading age’ so the material in textbooks is often inappropriate. Instead, a ‘grammar of situation’ uses material that arises naturally in class in the context of discussing issues significant to the students. In ‘The organization of English’ (1958) he writes:

It could be stimulating of teachers thought of English rather as a craft like woodwork than as a shrine of literary values or an Open Sesame to spiritual ones… there is a… danger in the vague and powerful worship of psychological and social aims in which by some magic a valuable experience is to be attained without… any visible means of support. Both pedantry and the neglect of craft avoid the full difficulty and lose the full reward of striving for the requisite skills – the linguistic skills, correct observation of the manners of usage, aptness and elegance of diction, pattern and variety of structure, and so on.

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Potrebbe essere stimolante se gli insegnanti pensassero all’Inglese piuttosto come a un artigianato simile all’intagliatura del legno anziché a uno scrigno di valori letterari oppure ad un “Apriti Sesamo” di valori spirituali … esiste … un pericolo nel caso di una potente idolatria di fini psicologici e sociali in cui, attraverso qualche importante esperienza magica si possano raggiungere … a qualsiasi mezzo di supporto visibile. Sia la pedanteria che la negligenza nell’arte (dell’insegnamento) eludono la piena difficoltà e perdono pieno guadagno per poter lottare oltre per l’acquisizione delle competenze necessarie – le competenze linguistiche, una corretta osservazione dei modi d’uso, una appropriatezza ed eleganza di dizione, disegno e varietà di struttura, e così via.

L’artigianato, egli dice, è “fuori moda” quando si discute del tema dell’insegnamento dell’Inglese: “preferiamo ortografia e compitazione oppure l’esperienza Messianica” – grammatica, o culto. Egli era ben consapevole del genere di illusioni “messianiche” che potevano essere promosse dagli entusiasti liberali di tutte le professioni, come reazione contro il “caos autoritario” dei vecchi metodi di insegnamento. La sua visione su tutti i tipi di religione di avanguardia era che:
All the gods in the democratic and communist pantheons are to an English specialist not worth one elegant sentence on house-breaking and the art of murder.

The new-fashioned religion of the modernist (communist, psychoanalyst, feminist, structuralist, etc.) is no better than the old-fashioned religion of the traditionalist: one is based on magic, the other on guilt. In either case the child has no ‘means of support’; neither approach leads to genuine ethical advance. Support comes from practical skills on the one hand, combined with identification with teaching or parental figures on the other. The useful types of identification – those that enable the ‘important value experiences’ of mental development – depend utterly on the acquisition of primary skills, namely, fluency in language usage. The ‘art of murder’, well described, shows the writer has imbibed aesthetic values which will strengthen his personality, in a way which simply obeying the prohibition ‘thou shalt not murder’ could not do. (For ‘murder’ may be read any mistake, misdemeanour or delinquency, grammatical or other, which the child knows theoretically they should not commit – but doesn’t see why not.)

When teachers move beyond the prescriptive values that go along with the kind of authority that relies primarily on obedience, they need not only ‘new criteria’ for judging educational standards, but also a new idea of what the ‘authority’ of the teacher consists in. In an article entitled “Poetry uninterests me” (1955) Harris expands on Harding’s concept of an ‘integrative’ relationship:

No doubt a great deal of domination is justifiable for practical purposes. But it ought not to be forgotten that a different way – an ‘integrative’ way – of offering one’s interests and attitudes to another person is possible. (D. W. Harding, cited in Harris, 1955, p. 102)

(Later, he uses the psychodynamic term ‘inter-personal’, which means the same thing.) A small degree of authority (‘domination’) may be temporarily conferred by the institution or by established expectations, but essentially, true authority has to be earned:

Research … would seem to bear out the idea not only that the role of the teacher has become more diffuse, embracing parental functions and the skills and interests of the social worker, but that the teacher who can recognize and work with the individuality of children is more successful than another who works by an authoritarian class-structured method… Again and again, successful teaching is seen as focused in the child himself, in his attitude to learning and in his growth as a mature person. The assumption of authority that relies primarily on obedience, they need not only ‘new criteria’ for judging educational standards, but also a new idea of what the ‘authority’ of the teacher consists in. In an article entitled “Poetry uninterests me” (1955) Harris expands on Harding’s concept of an ‘integrative’ relationship:

Non c’è dubbio che gran parte dell’autoritarismo sia giustificabile per fini pratici. Ma non si dovrebbe dimenticare che è possibile un modo diverso – un modo integrante – è possibile offrire a un’altra persona i propri interessi e competenze. (D. W. Harding, citato in Harris, 1955, p.102).

(Più avanti, usa il termine psicodinamico “interpersonale” che significa la stessa cosa). Un certo livello di autorità (“domination”) può essere conferito temporaneamente dall’istituzione o da aspettative stabilizzate, ma essenziamente, la vera autorevolezza deve essere guadagnata:

La ricerca … sembrerebbe sostenere l’idea che non solo il ruolo dell’insegnante è diventato più ampio, includendo le funzioni genitoriali e le competenze ed interessi dell’assistente sociale, ma che l’insegnante che può riconoscere e lavorare con l’individualità dei bambini, ha più successo di un altro che lavori attraverso un metodo autoritario strutturato in modo gerarchico. … Più volte si è visto che l’insegnamento che ha successo appare centrato sul bambino stesso, sulle sue attitudini ad apprendere e la sua possibilità di
tion is made that ‘where the pupil is “involved” his control of language is sure.’ (1966, pp. 114-15)

The new authority is based on the teacher’s success in engaging with the developmental principle in both the child and himself:

If [the teacher] relies for his authority on being known to the child and on knowing him and his motivations, he will acquire certain personal qualities which may include, for example, a demonstrable enthusiasm for English. (pp. 119-20)

This picture of the teacher in process of ‘acquiring’ the qualities that make him a good teacher will be unconsciously assessed by the children and is key to establishing the necessary identifications that support the development of linguistic skills. It is analogous to Bion’s concept of ‘becoming a psychoanalyst’. The ‘qualified’ English teacher is in the process of becoming one – a view which puts a value on learning from experience (in Bion’s sense). In practical terms, this may involve (for example) improvising in class: that way, ‘Everybody learns. This is another advantage over the book extracts’ (‘Descriptive Writing’, p. 11). However Harris says that suggestions for technique can help only good teachers, not bad ones; technique mechanically applied will not be effective, that is, will not be used in practice in real life situations. To this, he adds the need for training colleges to ‘select teachers who do not depend on children for security or satisfaction, and who can therefore be tolerant when children are amusing themselves with “not-poetry”’. The teacher who takes an interest in the relationship, and in his own learning processes, will feel less threatened by times when the child is not producing the required results or behaviour. The good teacher, like a parent, is also a learner, concerned with how his own development proceeds in tandem with that of the child. As Martha Harris put it in one of her books for parents, in the context of defining the meaning of the concept of ‘speaking well’:

Good speech… enables us to construct new forms of experience and to mix easily with groups and classes other than our own: with, that is, the great social class of the truly educated people, the people who are still learning. It is by taking an active part in this process, in which in a sense we are all equals, that we parents can help our teenagers and keep their respect as well as respect them. (Martha Harris, 2007, p. 156.)

Recognition of the ‘diffuse’ role of the English teacher in his semi-parental, counselling position at the core of the total curriculum, is what inspired the
Schools Counsellors’ Course initiated by Roland and Martha Harris in 1968:

The teacher will need to develop certain skills to a higher or perhaps a more conscious level than is the case at present. These skills and areas of knowledge are largely psychological, and include for example knowledge of child development and of group dynamics. Such subjects could be explored in training courses for beginners but perhaps even more profitably in follow-up courses for experienced teachers. ‘All therapists have as their effective core the inter-personal relationship’ – if this hypothesis is applicable to the teacher/pupil as to the therapist/patient relationship, the importance of the teacher’s understanding of his own role and motivation or of his pupil’s is apparent. (Harris, 1966, p. 120)

Ultimately his own conclusion was that the teacher should be ‘continually returning to the sources of his inspiration’ and be not just a teacher but an active reader and probably an active writer. Through practicing and demonstrating relevant (child-centred) language skills, in the language lesson not just in professional papers, an ‘integrative’ relationship may be established with the pupils that sets learning from experience in motion. As Donald Meltzer put it when he wrote of the restructuring of the Tavistock child psychotherapy course:

The central conviction, later hallowed in Bion’s concept of “learning from experience”, was that the kind of learning which transformed a person into a professional worker had to be rooted in the intimate relations with inspired teachers, living and dead, present and in books. Roland himself, as poet and scholar, was an inspired teacher and the many textbooks he wrote concentrated on the development in the student of the capacity to read in both a comprehensive and a penetrating way. (Meltzer, 2011, p. 345).

My father no doubt influenced my own work in many ways; but none more than in this advice to keep returning to one’s sources of inspiration, whether present or in books; and never to divorce the grammar of language from that of life. When I came to write my own first book, without consciously remembering this advice, the book took on the title Inspiration in Milton and Keats.

References

Note: Most of R. J. Harris’s papers including the Experimental Enquiry are downloadable from http://www.harris-meltzer-trust.org.uk/RolandHarris.html

Harris, M. G. (2007 [1969]). *Your Teenager.*


