Chapter 3

Speech and communication

1. Speech activity

The preceding chapters have attempted to show that Soviet psychology treats man's behaviour not as a passive state (as does, for example, American Behaviourism), but as a dynamic and purposive activity. This approach is extended by Soviet psychologists to their views on speech.

As a rule man does not produce speech responses to external acts; in a typical case he will perform a speech act directed towards some nonverbal aim or towards the solution of some practical or theoretical problem facing him. When we find ourselves in an unfamiliar foreign town, we need the foreign language most of all in order to find our way around the town, make a purchase, and obtain in a cafe or restaurant the dish we want to eat, etc. A student learning a foreign language in a technical college will in the future have to read specialist literature in that language, that is to say, he will have to solve problems which are not in the end concerned with speech (in this case they are cognitive).

As far as psychology is concerned, speech is identical to any other activity. It has a definite aim and is impelled by a motive, or more often by a system of motives. These motives may be internal; for instance, they may grow out of some need (Would you pass me the bread, so that I may satisfy my hunger/; internal motives may be of a social nature (I say something to calm the pupil who is getting into a state at the blackboard). But they can also be external, that is to say social, not only in their provenance but also in the way they are carried through. For example, the teacher who asks his pupil a question on the lesson is at the same time shaping a motive or a series of motives for the pupil's subsequent utterance. But the pupil may at the same time be guided by self-assertive motives, by the desire to gain or maintain prestige in the

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eyes of the teacher and of the class, etc., and these motives may furthermore turn out to be dominant. However, more often than not the motives impelling one to speech cannot be correlated exactly and exclusively with the speech; they are of a more general character, and speech turns out to be just one of the steps towards the satisfaction of the motive, towards the attainment of the final goal of the activity. What is more, speech may often be replaced by other, non-verbal

means of attaining that final goal (rather than ask for the bread to be passed, I can get up and fetch it for myself). Thus in real life man's speech usually has the status not of an independent (speech) activity, but of a speech act included in a non-verbal (or, to be more precise, not exclusively verbal) activity.

This does not mean that speech cannot be an independent activity. It is such when a man has a specific motive (or system of motives) which can be satisfied by speech itself, when the aim of the speech is not to obtain something but to construct the utterance as such (or a whole text-a system of utterances). When a pupil in a foreign language lesson speaks in order to speak (the motives which lie behind this act concern the correctness and appropriateness of his speech, and the satisfaction of these motives depends on the extent to which his utterance is correct and appropriate), this is a characteristic example of pure speech activity. In this case the speech act consists not of the utterance as a whole, but of its punctual components. The student 'thinks' what words or constructions to use, how to combine them in the utterance, which intonational model will be in order, and so on.

The psychological aspects of foreign speech activity can further be summed up under two headings, and this is something to be taken into account in teaching. On the one hand, the pupil should learn how to convert this activity into a speech act, how to apply it to non-verbal tasks and make it a part of his non-verbal activities. In order to achieve this, he must learn to form the new language automatically, without any participation of the conscious mind, or at least with its minimum participation; he must learn to think about what to say, rather than how to say it. When we talk of teaching dialogue-structured speech to a foreign language class, it is precisely this objective that w~ have in

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mind. On the other hand, the student must learn to establish, with the help of the new language, an independent communication activity, that is to say an activity, the aim of which is not the immediate satisfaction of concrete practical objectives, but the setting up of contact and mutual understanding, the establishing of interaction with the other members of his social group (collective), the impact on the knowledge, skills, system of social values (convictions), or emotions of another individual or group. The teacher's explanation, the pupil's answer (here we have in mind not a language lesson but a more general situation), the lecture or report, the commentator's speech on television-these are all forms of communication activity. In the manner of its manifestation (restricted exclusively to speech) communication activity is identical with pure speech activity, but its guiding motive is totally different. By achieving, with the help of the foreign language, such communication activity, the student is not speaking for the sake of speaking, nor in order to say what he has been asked to say; he speaks for a different

purpose, and his motive takes him beyond the limits of speech as such: his aim is now to structure speech in view of the needed effect. He says not only what he has to say, but also as it needs to be said in order to influence or to promote interaction. Naturally, in order to achieve this, he has to free the actual speech process from the participation of the consciousness, but here his task is more complex than in the first case. When we talk of teaching monological discourse in a foreign language, we more often than not have in mind the second case-communication activity with the help of a foreign language.

Let us return once more to the concepts described above. We speak of speech activity in the strict sense of the word when the guiding motive is the production of correct and appropriate speech (as in a language lesson). We speak of speech acts (as part of non-verbal activity), when the motive for the speech is non-specific and is common to that activity as a whole. Finally, we speak of communication activity when the motives for the speech lie again outside the concrete speech acts but are specific and can only be satisfied by means of speech:

Speech activity

         Speech act as part of non-verbal activity

         Speech act as part of communication activity

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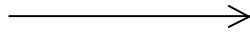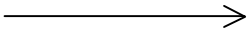
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It should be added that speech is not the only form of communication. Either in conjunction with speech or instead of it we can use a variety of other means for the same purposes: mimicry, gesticulation, non-verbal signalling systems, etc. In the rest of this exposition I shall be concerning myself only with speech, even though in practice non-verbal modes of intercourse occur quite frequently in communication (according to some psychologists, nearly 40% of information is transmitted in this way).

All that has been said above makes it evident that in teaching a foreign language we are setting the learners a series of psychological tasks. Firstly, we initiate them to speech activity as such, i.e. we teach them to construct speech utterances or organized chains of speech utterances. But this is only one, albeit vital, stage. Secondly, we teach the use of the language for non-verbal purposes, i.e. in the psychological sense we insert into the speech activity a different motivation and direct it to a different aim, we include it in a structure of non-verbal activity. In order to effect this transformation, we somehow have. to turn speech activity into speech acts and render it automatic. It is self-evident that for this the learner needs to have fluent mastery of the structures of the vcrbal utterances (speech acts) or, to put it more accurately, the rules governing the structure of the utterances must be

obliterated from the learner's conscious mind. They must no longer be discrete speech acts, and discrete tasks resolved in the process of speaking, but only automatic operations. Thirdly, and finally, we teach students to deploy these transformed speech acts at a new and higher level within the ambit of communication activity. In so doing, we set in front of the learner the task of producing not only linguistically correct speech. appropriate to the situation, but also of attaining the best possible utterances.

In this context it is worth considering the sequence of work involved in the acquisition of foreign speech. Clearly one cannot perform any speech activity in a foreign language without having the linguistic material for the construction of utterances, without some knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, or phonetics. At this stage, however, one only needs to know them to the extent to which they are really indispensable

for the speech activity. For this reason it is important when beginning the teaching ofa new language to set a sort of 'absolute minimum', to lay the foundations of the language, without which the teaching of any speech activity would be impossible. The consciousness of the learner must necessarily be involved in this process. Once such a foundation has been laid we must then build a 'ground floor': worn out discrete speech acts included in the new language speech activity, in order subsequently to turn them into operations and then transform them into habits. Here, too, we must call on the conscious mind of the pupil for help. We must then proceed to the 'first floor': transform the foreign speech activity into foreign speech acts. For that purpose we must alter the character of the task set before the student, change the motives and aims of his speech, and place him in a situation where he will be compelled to use speech as a tool. Then it will be in order to add a 'second floor' by progressing to a more complex situation and placing new demands on the learner's speech. Naturally, this sequence is of a very general character, and merely indicates which 'floors' would be unthinkable if the others have not been built. In practice, we always put the finishing touches to the lower floors while work on the upper floors is already under way; the mastering of vocabulary and grammar, for instance, continues in parallel to the formation of speech activity and its conversion into speech acts.

Sometimes it is asked whether one should begin by teaching dialogue or monological discourse. The answer given is more often than not incorrect, and this is true even of the present author's earlier works.! The point is that the very concepts of dialogue and monological discourse have been poorly defined in psychological terms; it is quite obvious that self-comained discourse should not be taught from the very beginning, but it does not follow that one should necessarily start with pure dialogue.

There is one more remark to be made concerning speech operations included in fully formed (automatic) speech acts. These are formed in the learner not only and not necessarily as the result of the conversion of previously conscious acts; as in other forms of activity, such operations may emerge in part as the result of unconscious probing, adapta-

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tion, and correlation with some external standard. There runs, parallel to the analytical path towards the acquisition of a foreign language, the path of imitation; but the method of 'pure' imitation without the participation of conscious analysis is less fruitful. We shall return to this problem in the chapter devoted to the psychology of learning control.

2. The structure of speech acts On the psychological level, the mastering of a foreign language entails therefore above all the constitution of individual operations (arising initially as independent acts) then their combination into an integral utterance (speech act) and, finally, the modification of speech acts according to the situation and the purpose of the communication. Obviously to organize such language acquisition in the best possible way, one has to have a clear idea of the operational structure of speech acts. The study of this structure is, among other problems, the object of a special branch of science-psycholinguistics. At the present moment it is being rapidly developed in many countries, including the USSR.

Man does not immediately begin with speech, with the choice and combination of sounds, words, and constructs. As in every purposive activity, there has to be a plan (or intention, or programme) for any future utterance. Such a programme is generally of a visual nature; the content of the utterance emerges as it were in the mind's eye of the speaker in the form of a picture, schema, etc. This pr:)gramme is retained in the conscious mind (operative memory) until it is no longer necessary, i.e. until we have said what we wanted and passed on to the next utterance. The speech process consists in the translation of the programme into a strict linguistic form, which in the mother tongue is a more or less automatic procedure (we are not considering the written language, to be distinguished from oral language above all by the deliberate and conscious character of the choice and combination of its components). In the early stages of mastering a foreign language, the transition from the programme to the actual utterance is not achieved directly as 'programme → utterance', but is effected through the mediation of the mother tongue, viz 'programme → utterance in the mother tongue → utterance in the foreign language'.

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Secondly, the transition itself is not automatic, and the learner will not . immediately or without effort come up with the foreign equivalent to the utterance in the mother tongue, remember the rules, and successively apply them.

As teachers, our task is to 'get rid' of the intermediate stage as quickly as possible and to bring the psychological structure of the utterance in the foreign tongue as close as possible to that which operates in the mother tongue. This means providing the student expediently with a system of operations which will not only correspond to the real psychological structure of the speech act, and will be easy to convert and put into effect, but will also ensure maximum support from the habits for the construction of utterances in the mother tongue. In this way we can make the student's subsequent work much easier. The learner should not so much be acquainted with the rules of translation from the mother tongue to the foreign one (as is almost always done in current methodologies) as, more importantly, with the rules governing the transition from the speech operations of the mother tongue to those of the foreign one.

In this context it is relevant to say a few words about the operations themselves. There are two types of such operations, which we may agree to describe as macro-operations and micro-operations.

Micro-operations are universal; they occur in the speech of all languages, and, in fact, do not relate only to speech. An example of this kind of operation is the 'probability prognosis'; we have some information, the beginning of a phrase, say, and we unconsciously and automatically prognosticate its most probable ending:

'Shall I compare thee. . . to a summer's day.' 'Would you pass the salt and. . . pepper.'

Macro-operations are more complex and include the micro-operations. They are specific to the speech of a particular language. For instance, someone who can speak both Russian and English is evidently carrying out so-called 'transformations' in his speech processes. But someone who

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speaks Vietnamese is not carrying out the same sort of macro-operation, for in his case the operational structure of the utterance is different.

There are three different types of transition from operations in the mother tongue to those used in the foreign tongue. The first type is simple transference of the operation to new linguistic material. The second is the sort of transference which requires corrections and clarification (both Russian and German are inflected languages, but one cannot simply put a German Dativ where the Russian has a dative). The third type is where the operation has to be

formed from scratch (if we teach Russian to a Vietnamese he will have to form all the operations connected with the grammatical aspects of the utterance).

In the present chapter I shall not go into any more detail about the taxonomy of particular speech operations and their sequence in the speech process; the reader who so desires can find the relevant information in the recommended reading. For our immediate purposes it is important to stress that the concrete grammatical forms and indices figure only at some late stage in the formation of the utterance: in the first stages of this sort of construction we deal only with the most general characteristics of content and grammar. This is true of the actual words as well, which only acquire a semantic and phonetic 'fleshing out' at the very end.